

The background of the image is a rich, multi-colored nebula in space. It features a dense field of stars in various colors, including blue, yellow, and white. A prominent bright light source is visible at the bottom center, creating a lens flare effect. The nebula's colors range from deep blues and purples to bright oranges and reds, with wispy, ethereal clouds of gas and dust. The overall scene is a majestic and awe-inspiring view of the universe.

*The Covenant with*  
Abraham

A  
Ruín and Redemption.com  
*Teaching Series*

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# The Abrahamic Covenant

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# The Abrahamic Covenant

## I. The Background of the Abrahamic Covenant

### 1. The Descendants of NOAH: *Genesis 10*

A) *JAPHETH* (Genesis 10:2-5): From the sons of Japheth, we're told, "the coastlands of the nations were separated into their lands. . ." (v5). We mentioned in our lesson with Noah that these names listed in verses 2-4 become especially significant in light of the last chapter of Isaiah. This is because in Isaiah 66 we're given what is probably the clearest Old Testament prophecy of the missionary labors that would take place in the New Testament age.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 66:18-21 describes the fulfillment of the Great Commission. And in the midst of that passage in Isaiah, we are told that missionary laborers would be sent to places like *Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tarshish*; these are the same places recorded in Genesis 10:2-4. It's the sons of Japheth who would be brought home to the Savior in the latter days. Noah said in Genesis 9:27, "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem." What's he saying?<sup>2</sup> Well, the Jews would come from Shem—the Savior would come from Shem. But the sons of Japheth would be Gentile outsiders who would embrace the God of the Jews.

B) *HAM* (Genesis 10:6-20): In Genesis 9:20-27 we read how Noah cursed Canaan, the son of Ham, because of what he had done to him. Now, here in chapter 10, we learn about the impact this curse had on all of Ham's offspring: From *CUSH* (through Nimrod, verse 8) would come *Babylon* (v10) and *Assyria* (v11), pagan kingdoms that would later drive God's people out of their land into exile (Israel would be exiled by Assyria; Judah later by Babylon). From *MIZRAIM* would come not only *the Egyptians*<sup>3</sup> (the nation who enslaved the Hebrews in the days leading up to the deliverance of Moses), but also *the Philistines* (v14), some of the worst enemies of the Old Testament church in the days of the judges and the kings. From *CANAAN* would come all the nations who made up *the Canaanites* (v19), the people who dwelt in the promised land that God's people had to drive out, and who became stumbling blocks to God's people later when they couldn't drive them out completely.

C) *SHEM* (Genesis 10:21-31): From Shem would come Eber (v21), which, in turn, is where we get the term Hebrews;<sup>3</sup> because it would be through Eber's line that Abraham would come; and of course, through Abraham's line that the Messiah would one day come (as we'll find out later). We'll deal with Shem and his descendants in more detail below as we consider the ancestry of Abraham.

### 2. The Tower of BABEL: *Genesis 11:1-9*

A) *The STORY of the Tower of Babel*: God's command to Noah and his seed was to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). The story of the tower of Babel describes for us how mankind rebelled against God by attempting to do exactly the opposite. Instead of filling the earth, they planned to stay in one place. And instead of seeking God's glory, they sought to make a name for themselves (11:4). Staying in one place and building a city seems to reflect a desire for *security*. On the other hand, building a tower and making a name for themselves seems to reflect a desire for *significance*. These two things: *security* and *significance*, are not bad things in and of themselves. The problem was that these men were trying to seek after these things *apart from God*. Instead of seeking the *protection* that comes from God they sought for it in high walls and man-power; instead of seeking the *praise* that comes from God they sought for it from those around them. The heart of their sin was self-sufficiency; "the tower is a symbol of human autonomy."<sup>4</sup> Some people think that the tower of Babel presents before us a picture of man-made religion; the men in this story are trying to climb up to God by their own works and effort. And it's a helpful analogy in some respects. But

<sup>1</sup> It even seems that this passage in Isaiah is describing the Gentile mission to the Gentiles.

<sup>2</sup> Mizraim is the Hebrew word for Egypt; and Psalm 78:51 specifically references the Egyptians as the descendants of Ham.

<sup>3</sup> "The designation 'Hebrew' (Hb. 'ibri' see 14:13) is derived from 'Eber' (Hb. 'eber')." (*ESV Study Bible* note on 10:21).

<sup>4</sup> *ESV Study Bible* note on Genesis 11:1-9.

actually, *the people in this story weren't trying to get to God at all; their whole goal was trying to find ways to live without Him.* Actually then, these men were trying to exist without God—and trying to exist without God is the epitome of rebellion against God. They thought their tower was pretty great, but Scripture says that God had to *come down* to see it (v5). The Lord then confuses their languages (Babel means “confusion”), and scatters them abroad over the face of the earth (v9). All their efforts were for naught; and the very thing they feared came upon them after all. We're left with the truth of Psalm 127:1 ringing in our ears: “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”

*B) The SIGNIFICANCE the Tower of Babel:* The tower of Babel points us *backward* to the rebellion of Adam in Genesis 3; for ultimately, their actions were the fruit of Adam's sin. It also points us *forward*, because from Babel would one day emerge Babylon, the city of destruction whose people are epitomized in Scripture as those who set themselves in opposition to God. We're also pointed *inward*, to examine our own hearts before the Lord. Those living in Babel had sought security and praise in things other than God. What ways do we do the same thing? What ways do we seek security and praise elsewhere? Even for those of us in ministry: What ways do we try to gain praise and significance through our ministry; or what are the ways that we try to do our ministry solely by means of our own efforts, or gifts, but apart from God? Lastly, we're pointed *upward*, to God, and what He's promised. The Lord would later say: “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great” (Genesis 15:1; cf. Psalm 3:3). What's God saying here? He's saying: *Abram, you don't have to seek security in other things—because I AM your shield;* and He's saying: *Abram, you don't have to seek a reward anywhere else, because I'm going to lavish upon you rewards far greater than you could ever dream, Abram.*<sup>5</sup> So then, what we learn is that God knows how to *protect* His people, and God knows how to *reward* His people, and He's promised to do both.<sup>6</sup>

#### LEARNING FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL

THE DESIRE	THE ISSUE	GOD'S PROMISE	THE LESSON
1) To build a city (v4a) 2) To not be scattered abroad (v4d)	Seeking <i>security</i> in other things apart from God	“Abram, I am a shield to you” (Gen.15:1).	God knows how to <i>protect</i> His people
1) To build a tower (v4b) 2) To make a name for themselves (v4c)	Seeking <i>significance</i> from others apart from God	“Your reward shall be very great” (Gen.15:1)	God knows how to <i>reward</i> His people

### 3. The Ancestry of ABRAHAM: *Genesis 11:10-32*

The genealogy in Genesis 11:10-32 records the ancestry of Abraham. It's similar to the genealogy back in Genesis 5, in that both genealogies span the length of 10 generations. It also differs from the genealogy back in Genesis 5 in at least a few ways: *First*, we notice that people recorded in Genesis 5 lived a lot longer than they do now in Genesis 11.<sup>7</sup> *Secondly*, the phrase that was repeated over and over again in Genesis 5, that “all the days of [[Adam] were [so many] years, and he died”, is missing here in Genesis 11. *Thirdly*, though it seems the covenant line in Genesis 5 was preserved faithful to the Lord, we come to learn that the covenant line in Genesis 11 had fallen into paganism. We know this because of what Scripture records in Joshua 24:2: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “From

<sup>5</sup> Jay Sklar notes the play on words here: “in contrast to humanity's desire to make a name [Heb. *Shem*] for its own glory, the Lord himself, through the line of Shem [*name*] will make Abram's name great.” (Sklar, *Notes on the Pentateuch*, p50).

<sup>6</sup> One of the questions that confronts us here is simply: Will we live and spend ourselves here on earth for the glory that fades away, or for the glory that endures forever? A few powerful examples to me personally: 1) *The city of Tyre in Ezekiel 26:* Tyre was a coastal city that was one day absolutely beaming with glory. But the Lord declares that in the end, He would bring the waters up over the city, and bring the residents of Tyre down to the pit along with “the people of old” (v19). It seems to be an allusion to the rising of the tides that would gradually cover the area where this prestigious city was once situated. And isn't the glory of the world just like that? It flourishes like the grass for a moment, but in the end it fades away; for it is not a glory that endures. 2) *Many film stars now who are out of their prime:* Just 20 years before, they were basking in all the glory the world could afford. But now they've gained weight, they've aged; they're no longer being cast for the big films or asked to be interviewed on the late night shows. There's nothing wrong with aging and gaining weight—it happens to all of us! But the point is that *this* is the glory they (many of them) were living for. And now, after just a few short years, it's already fading and shriveling up. *The lesson for us:* Don't live your life for the glory that fades and withers. Live for the glory that lasts forever.

<sup>7</sup> This could be because of the nature of the catastrophic atmospheric changes that took place in the flood. Remember, it wasn't just rain that came down in the flood—rain lasting for 40 days can't flood the earth—we're told that “the floodgates of the sky were opened” (7:11), which were the waters that God had placed “above the expanse” in Genesis 1:7. So something massive was happening here environmentally that may easily have affected life expectancy in a major way, to say the least.

ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, *and they served other gods*. Then I took your father Abraham. . .”” So then, somewhere between Shem and Terah, the covenant line had fallen away from God into idol worship.

We can also mention something here about Abram's father. Again, we're told in Joshua 24 that Abram's father and grandfather served other gods. But notice that in Genesis 11:31, it wasn't only Abram and Sarai—but Abram's father Terah—that set out for the land of Canaan, the land of promise. On the way they stopped in Haran and settled there (v31).<sup>8</sup> Later, Abram continued the journey; but Terah never made it; he died in Haran (v32).<sup>9</sup> Why didn't Terah make it all the way to Canaan? What happened? Well, his name might give us a hint. In Hebrew, Terah means “delay.” Terah delayed. He went half way, but never made it home. And what a sober lesson for us. Never rest short of salvation. Being outside of Christ means no salvation no matter how close you got. There's no middle ground. Either we've come home to Christ and entered His rest or we haven't.<sup>10</sup>

## II. An Overview of the Abrahamic Covenant

\*The covenant with Abraham is *the next stage* in the Covenant of Grace:

- I. The Covenant of Works with Adam
- II. The Genesis 3:15 promise of a Redeemer:
  - A) The Noahic Covenant
  - B) *The Abrahamic Covenant*
  - C) The Mosaic Covenant
  - D) The Davidic Covenant
  - E) The New Covenant

\*The main passages involving the covenant with Abraham are Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; and 22:15-19. The covenant that God makes with Abraham is established with him and then confirmed throughout his life over the course of several years. The covenant isn't just confirmed to Abraham, but also to Isaac and then Jacob.<sup>11</sup> Though the word “covenant” occurs only in Genesis 15 and 17, we also see covenant language and promises earlier in Genesis 12 with Abraham's call, and then again in Genesis 22 on Mount Moriah. So all these passages are important for understanding the covenant with Abraham.

\*God's covenant with Abraham is so central to the Scriptures, that it's been said that Genesis 12:1-3 is “the center point of the promises of the covenant of grace in the history of redemption. Everything

<sup>8</sup> We don't know exactly how long they were in Haran before Abram left for Canaan, but the fact that they “settled there” (v31) implies it was a long time. This was more than just someone getting sick or needing to pick up more supplies in Haran.

<sup>9</sup> There is some ambiguity about whether Abram left Terah in Haran before or after Terah had died. The account in Genesis seems to imply that Abram left Terah in Haran while he was still alive, and that he continued to live in Haran another 60 years before his death. We come to this conclusion by simply calculating the numbers: Terah was 70 years old when he had Abram (v26); Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran for Canaan; and 70 + 75 would make Terah 145 years old when Abram left Haran; we're told in verse 32 that Terah lived to be 205 years old, which would mean that Abram left his father Terah in Haran and he continued to live there in Haran an additional 60 years. But in Acts 4, Stephen says that Abram only left Haran for Canaan *after* his father had died. *Three main solutions* have been proposed: 1) In Acts 7, Stephen is speaking of Terah's spiritual death. Having begun his spiritual journey to Canaan, he apostatized in Haran 60 years before his death, at which time Abram left Haran for Canaan. 2) Stephen is following an alternate text (the “Samaritan Pentateuch”), which says that Terah died when he was 145 years old (rather than 205). 3) We don't actually know who it was that was born to Terah when he was 70 years old, as 11:26 tells us: “Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.” It's likely that Abram is mentioned first, not because he was the first-born, but on account of his importance in the story. In this case, Terah had his first son when he was 70 years old, but didn't have Abram until he was at least 130 years old.

<sup>10</sup> One more application here: We never know what God is doing. If we were to just take this passage of Scripture at face value, without knowing what would happen in Genesis 12 and beyond, it would seem to us that *Terah* is very much the focus of the story. It's not Abram who takes along his father Terah, but “Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans. . .” (v31). Terah seems to be very much the main character and central figure of the story in verse 31. From the outside looking in, we would think this story is about *Terah*; we would think God is at work in Terah; God is drawing this man Terah to himself. But all along, God's purpose was actually for *Terah's son*. All along, God's plan was to use Terah to draw *Abram*. The lesson? We never know what God is doing. Often we are wrong; and often, He is drawing to himself those we don't expect.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 6:4 speaks of the “covenant” (*singular*) God made with “them” (*plural*): It was the same covenant being confirmed.

before Genesis 12:1-3 is leading up to it. Everything after Genesis 12:1-3 in the Bible is fulfilling it.”<sup>12</sup>

\*The New Testament constantly refers back to God's covenantal dealings with Abraham to explain the foundation of our salvation in Christ. Our salvation is built upon God's covenant with Abraham. So we can only understand our own salvation to the degree that we understand God's covenant with Abraham.

\*Just as we saw in God's covenant with Noah, there are both temporal and eternal components in God's covenant with Abraham. God makes *temporal promises* (land, seed, blessing)—but behind the temporal promises were *eternal realities*. Just like all the other manifestations of the Covenant of Grace, God's covenant with Abraham is here *to teach us about the Savior and salvation*. In particular, we learn about:

1. The CALL of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how God draws us to himself*
2. The RECIPIENTS of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about who God's people are*
3. The PROMISES of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about what we've been given in Christ*
4. The NATURE of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how sinners come into favor with God*
5. The STABILITY of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about the security we have in Christ*
6. The MARK of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how we can know our faith is real*
7. The SIGN of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about the badge God has given to His people*

### III. What we learn from the Abrahamic Covenant

1. The CALL of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how God draws us to himself*

A) *The NATURE of God's Call:* Genesis 12:1-3 records God's calling of Abram to leave kin and country for the land that God would show him. There are both *commands* and *promises* in the call of Abram. We see the COMMANDS in 12:1: “Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house. . .’” God is calling Abram to leave: 1) his *country* (land); 2) his *relatives* (people); and 3) his *father's house*, which probably signifies both his father's authority and his family heritage; as he is being called to submit to *a new authority* and obtain *a new heritage*. But along with the commands God gives Abram to leave his country, relatives and father's house, the Lord also gives him PROMISES. We see seven promises in verses 2-3:<sup>13</sup>

1) *And I will make you a great nation:* In Genesis 17:4-5, the Lord expands this promise from one great nation to “a multitude of nations.” From Abram would come forth entire physical nations—not

<sup>12</sup> Quote from Ligon Duncan from his *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, the various promises made to Abraham have been classified in different ways. Perhaps the most simply way to classify the promises are the communicable versus the incommunicable. This same language is also used as it relates to the doctrine of God: which attributes we also reflect (communicable) versus which are His alone (incommunicable). But the same terminology can also be used with respect to the promises to Abraham. Many of the promises to Abraham are *communicable* to us; that is, we have a share in them just as much as Abraham did. For instance, Paul writes in Galatians 3:9 that “those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.” But some of the promises to Abraham are *incommunicable* to us; that is, they were made to him alone and we have no share in them. For instance, speaking of the promise to Abraham that the Lord would make him into a great nation, Goodwin notes that, “as we all know, [this] is to us incommunicable” (*Children in the Covenant*, Works V9, p428ff). Witsius puts it this way: “The promises annexed to the stipulation are of various kinds; some are spiritual, others corporal. The spiritual, are either general and common to all believers, or special and peculiar to Abraham.” (V2, p146). Others have been even more specific. For instance, Roberts divides up the promises into as much as five different groups: “1) Some of these covenant privileges tend to, and terminate in Jesus Christ alone the Head of the covenant, as only accomplishable in him. As, those promises: 'In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.' 'All the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.' 'And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.' These promises were directed to Abraham, but only fulfilled in Abraham's primary seed, Jesus Christ, as the New Testament abundantly witnesses. 2) Some of these covenant privileges seem peculiarly applicable to Abraham. As, the eminency and greatness of his name; that he should be a blessing; that he should be a father of many nations, etc. 3) Some of these privileges belonged more especially to Abraham's Jewish seed, and not to his Christian seed. As, the inheritance of Canaan; the token of circumcision. 4) Some of these privileges belonged both to Abraham, and to Abraham's Jewish and Christian seed. As, all the temporals of common concernment; divine benediction, protection, remuneration, etc. And all the spirituals, as the Lord's being a God to them; the blessing in Jesus Christ, etc. 5) Finally, the outside, the visible advantage only of the covenant state, covenant promises, covenant inauguration, and other covenant administrations, belong to the mere visible seed of Abraham, that are his merely by profession; but the inside, the invisible advantages and saving efficacy of all these, as well as the outside, belong to the true believing and gracious seed of Abraham, whether Jewish, or Christian, respectively.” (Roberts, pp319-20).



only the *Israelites* (from Jacob), but also the *Ishmaelites* (from Ishmael), the *Edomites* (from Esau). But there was also much more meant by this promise than physical nations. The New Testament in referring back to these promises, tells us that they extended not only to those who were the *physical descendants* of Abraham, but also to those who would “follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham” from *among the Gentiles* (Romans 4:16-17). In other words, this promise has its ultimate fulfillment in the church. The great nation and multitude of nations that the Lord was promising Abraham was ultimately *the people of God*—those who with Abraham would call upon the God of Abraham; a great multitude indeed gathered from every tribe, tongue, and nation under heaven.<sup>14</sup>

2) *And I will bless you:* The blessing isn't specified here, but it becomes clear later. We'll be talking about it in more detail ahead, but for now we can simply note that this same blessing rests on all of God's people, for the New Testament tells us that “those who are of faith are *blessed with Abraham*, the believer” (Galatians 3:9). It's the blessing that David would write about years later: “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity” (Psalm 32:1-2). It's the blessing that our Savior would speak of in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .” (Matthew 5:1-12). And it's the blessing that Paul would reflect on when he wrote: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. . .” (Ephesians 1:3).

3) *And [I will] make your name great:* This points us back again to the story of the tower of Babel. If you remember, the reason those men were building the tower was *to make a name for themselves*. God is telling Abraham: Don't waste your time trying to make a name for yourself. Seek after Me, and I will make you a name that will endure forever. We're told in Genesis 10:8-10 that the founder of Babel was Nimrod, and that he “became a mighty one on the earth.” So, Nimrod was “a mighty one” on the earth. . .but who has ever heard his name? Nobody knows who he is. We have to be told that he used to be big-time back in the day to even know who in the world he is!<sup>15</sup> Not so with Abraham. You don't have to tell anyone who Abraham is. Why? God made his name great.

4) *And so you shall be a blessing:* Earlier in verse 2, God had promised to bless Abraham; but here, God is promising to bless others through him. In other words, God's blessing would not only *come to Abraham* (v2b), but it would also *flow through him* (v2d). God wouldn't just bless him, He would make him an instrument of blessing in the lives of those around him. What an amazing thing! The blessing of God didn't just mean *deliverance from sins' punishment*—it also meant *fruitfulness for God's glory*. God's blessing wasn't just about *salvation in the next life*—it was about *significance in this life*. And doesn't God promise us the same thing in Christ? Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.” (2 Corinthians 2:14). And our Savior cried out in John 7:38-39, “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'” Just like Abraham, God has promised to make *us* instruments of His blessing in this life for eternity.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Revelation 7:9. This is also confirmed in the Old Testament itself by the fact that God promises, not only Abraham, but also Jacob, that a *company of nations* would come forth from him (Genesis 35:11). Though someone might argue that the multitude of nations from Abraham were the three physical nations mentioned above, it would only be one nation that would come forth from Jacob (the Israelites)—and yet God also promises that a company of nations would come forth from him. Ainsworth notes on Genesis 12:2: “But under this promised nation, was implied also a spiritual seed, of faithful people, Romans 4:11-12; Galatians 3:7.” And Roberts likewise writes: “A father of many nations have I made thee; Thou shalt be a father of multitudes of nations.’ That is, not only of the Jews, which was but one nation; but also of the Gentiles.” (p306).

<sup>15</sup> Actually, in the English language, his name is even used as slang for “idiot.”

<sup>16</sup> And how sweet is it that fruitfulness is a *promise* for believers. In the garden it was a *command*. In Genesis 1:28, God said to Adam, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. . .” But here with Abram, God does so much more than *command* him to be fruitful and multiply. What God had given to Adam in the garden as a *command*—He now gives to Abram as a *promise*. Ligon Duncan in his audio series on Covenant Theology notes that it's debatable whether this clause in v2d is an *indicative promise* (the way we've taken it) or an *imperative command* (IE, “and so be a blessing”). He goes on to say that however we take the clause here, both things are true: God both promises to make us instruments of blessing as well as commands us to be so. I take it as a promise, since it would seem strange to include a single exhortation in the middle of verses 2-3 that are otherwise an exclusive list of promises alone (the exhortations were in verse 1). Another thing Duncan notes here is that Abram had to come out from the world in order to be a blessing to the world. He had to be set apart from the nations in order to be a blessing to the nations. And this is exactly what Christ is calling us to when He calls us to be salt and light, a city on a hill. The reason we're to be in the world but not of the world is in order to reach the world. Christians tend to have a hard time holding these two truths in tension: either we live too much like the world or we despise the world. But Scripture

5) *And I will bless those who bless you:* What does this mean? We can understand this clause by recalling Noah's prophecy in Genesis 9:26-27, where he says, "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem. . ." What's Noah saying? He's saying that the descendants of Japheth would be blessed *as they dwelt in the tents of Shem*. Why? Because the Messiah would come from Shem, and the blessing is in the Messiah. So if you're dwelling with Shem, ultimately, you're dwelling with the Messiah who would come from Shem. If you're at peace with Shem, you're at peace with the Messiah who would come from Shem, and God's blessing is upon you. So again, for Japheth, to dwell with *Shem* meant to dwell with the *Messiah* who would come from Shem. And it's the same thing here: To bless *Abram* meant to bless the *Messiah* who would come from Abram. Those who bless Abram in the truest sense are those who bless the Savior who would come forth from him.<sup>17</sup>

6) *And the one who curses you I will curse:* This clause isn't as pleasant but it's no less important. Abraham won't just be the door for a blessing—but also for a curse. If those who bless Abram are by implication blessing the Messiah, then those who curse him are by implication cursing the Messiah. As Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms at the temple, he declared to Mary: "Behold, this child is appointed for *the fall* and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed. . ." (Luke 2:34). Many would rise to life and blessing through faith in the Messiah, but many would also stumble and fall on account of Him. It's the same truth that Paul wrote of when he said in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." There is no neutral response to Jesus: To receive Him is to be blessed, but to reject Him is to be cursed.<sup>18</sup>

7) *And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed:* Blessing is promised over and over again to Abram in these two short verses (12:2-3). But each time it's mentioned, the meaning is distinct. In verse 2b, blessing would *come to* him; in verse 2d, blessing would *flow through* him; and now here in verse 3c, blessing would *spring from* him. This clause is incredibly significant. We're going to deal with it in depth later, and show why it is that, in Galatians 3:8, Paul actually refers to this clause as *the gospel*. But for now, I want us to just notice the language that the Lord chooses to use here in His promise to Abram; that in him "*all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" God's plan from the beginning was never just to bless Abram, but in him to bless all peoples. His desire has always been to draw every tribe and tongue and nation to himself. Christian missions started long before Matthew 28! In fact, God's promise here in Genesis 12:3 is actually the basis for the Great Commission: God sends us to the nations with *hope* because He's *promised* to extend His blessing to them as well.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from these seven promises in verses 2-3, the Lord gives Abram another promise in verse 7, where after Abram had come into the land of Canaan, we read: "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" So, the Lord makes several promises to Abram here in Genesis 12. Really, we could condense them all down to *three promises* that equate exactly to the *commands* God had given to him: The Lord is telling Abram: 1) leave your *land* (country), 2) your *people* (relatives), 3) and your *heritage* (father's house); because: 1) I am going to give you *a new land*, 2) I'm going to make you into *a new people*, and 3) I'm going to give you *a new heritage*:

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calls us to come out from the world and be set apart from the world—but to do so in order to be a blessing to the world.

<sup>17</sup> Insight again gleaned from Ligon Duncan's Covenant Theology course. The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible notes on this clause: "*Those who bless*. That is, those who acknowledge Abraham and his offspring as God's agent of blessing."

<sup>18</sup> Still, it's also true: "God's greater intention was to bless, not curse. This is indicated in the Hebrew text by switching from a form indicating resolve (I will bless) to a simple statement of fact (I will curse) and by switching from the plural (those who bless) to the singular (whoever curses)." (Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible; cf. also Waltke on Genesis 12:3, p206).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid Duncan. Thomas Goodwin sees another truth in that phrase, *families of the earth*; namely, that God's covenant blessing is not limited to a believing individual, but also extends to the children of believers and their household, or *family*: "The promise (Genesis 12:3) runs in these terms, 'In thee shall all the *families* of the earth be blessed;' as elsewhere, [in] Genesis 18:18, and 22:18, it runs in these terms, 'All the *nations* of the earth shall be blessed.' These expressions are both used; the one to show, the seed should be of all nations and people, yet so as withal the covenant was to run by families in those nations. Therefore the New Testament quotes it in both senses: Galatians 3:8 says, *panta ta ethne*, all *nations*, or, *heathens*, because some of all nations shall be converted; but Peter, when he makes mention of the covenant, [in] Acts 3:25, though chiefly for the end to show the Jews were the first children of the covenant, yet he expounds these words spoken to Abraham, 'In thy seed shall the families of the earth be blessed'. . ." (Works, V9, pp431-32). We'll speak more of this later.

	LAND	PEOPLE	HERITAGE
WHAT ABRAM LEFT	His country (12:1)	His relatives (12:1)	His father's house (12:1)
WHAT GOD PROMISED	Possess a new land (12:1,7)	Father a new people (12:2)	Gain a new heritage (12:2-3)

So, there's both commands and promises in God's calling of Abram. There were *commands*: This wasn't just a suggestion for Abram—to leave everything he knew and go to the land that God would show him—it was a command; so there were commands. But there were also *promises*: God doesn't tell Abram to leave everything just because; just for the sake of sacrifice. God tells him to leave these things behind *because He has something infinitely better in store for him* (Genesis 12:2-3).

And this is meant to highlight for us the way that God calls *us* as believers to himself in the gospel, in the Covenant of Grace. The way that God calls Abram to the land of Canaan is exactly the same way that He calls us home to himself in the gospel. There are *commands*. God called Abram to leave everything and follow Him; and it's no different for us. Jesus said to the rugged fisherman, “Follow Me” (Mark 1:17). Christ was calling His disciples to walk away from everything they knew for a new life. This is how it is in the Covenant of Grace. Abram had to count the cost, and so do we.

There are commands, but there are also *promises*. God tells Abram to leave his land, his people, and his inheritance for something much, much greater: he will inherit an infinitely better land, he will father an innumerable people, and he will gain an everlasting inheritance. It's a pretty good trade. Losing the world in order to gain Christ is no sacrifice. Jesus describes it this way: “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and *from joy* over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44). Jim Elliot, missionary to Ecuador, put it this way, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

*B) The POWER of God's Call:* How did Abram respond to God's call? Genesis 12:4 says, “So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him. . .” But that wasn't exactly the whole story. We know this because of what Scripture records in Acts 7:2-3. In making his defense to the Sanhedrin, Stephen begins by saying, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, *before he lived in Haran*, and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.'” It seems that Abram had lived in Haran a long time (cf. 12:5). And Acts tells us that God spoke to Abram the words recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 *before* Abram even lived in Haran; which means that Abram did obey, but only years after God had first appeared to him. Abram followed God's call, but it took him a long time.

Well, what happened? How did Abram finally come to his senses in Haran and make the rest of the journey to Canaan? Stephen tells us in the next verse, in verse 4: “after his father died, God removed him from there [Haran] into this land in which you are now living” (ESV). What happened? “*God removed him.*” And by the way, the Greek word used here (Gr. *metoikizo*) is only used twice in Scripture; once here and then later in verse 43, where Stephen quotes from a passage in Amos that describes how God would send Israel into exile for their sins: “I will *remove* you beyond Babylon.” That's a violent removal. And yet that's *the same word* that's being used here for how it was that God brought Abram into Canaan! Ultimately, *God did it*—God *caused* Abram to leave Haran and come into the land of promise. God didn't just *call* Abram to the land of promise—He *drew* Abram to the land of promise.<sup>20</sup> There was a command, but in the Covenant of Grace, all that God requires, He also provides. This was more than a call—it was an *effectual call*; it was a call that Abram couldn't resist, because God himself would cause him to obey. And it's no different with us; with God's calling us to turn from our sins and believe upon Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus, you need to know that the reason you left all to follow Christ wasn't because you made a decision—it was because *God* made a decision. It wasn't because you chose Him but *because He chose you*. What we see here with Abram is the same truth Jesus spoke of in the gospels: “Many are called, *but few are chosen.*”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> God declares this truth himself in Genesis 15:7, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it;” and we hear of the same truth from Abraham's own lips later in Genesis 20:13 as he begins to explain to Abimelech why he called Sarah his sister: “it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house. . .”

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 22:14. We see the same truth later with Isaac instead of Ishmael and Jacob instead of Esau (see Romans 9:6-13).

## 2. The RECIPIENTS of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about who God's people are*

In Genesis 12:1-3, we learned about *the call of God*. Through the rest of the chapter (Genesis 12:4-20), we learn about *the children of God*: who are God's redeemed people? What do their lives look like? What are the characteristics that mark their lives? What sort of people are they? And in answering these questions from the rest of Genesis 12 (verses 4-20), we can say two things. First:

*A) God's people are NEW CREATURES:* We see this in Genesis 12:4-9. Abram follows God's call to the land of Canaan, going forth “as the Lord had spoken to him” (v4). As he travels through the land, we're told twice that he builds altars to the Lord; one in Shechem (v6), and then again near Bethel, where we're told, “he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord” (v8).

These verses are describing for us *Abram's relationship with the Lord*. He's now a man who calls upon the name of the Lord. He's a man of prayer. A man of worship. A man who loves the Lord. A man with new desires, a new Lord, and a new life.<sup>22</sup> Abram is a new creature in Christ.

These verses also describe for us *Abram's relationship towards the world*. When Abram gets to Canaan, he doesn't settle down in one place. He goes from Shechem, to Bethel, then further south. This is to show us that Abram was a stranger and an exile on the earth (Hebrews 11:13), *even as he lived in Canaan*. *Even in the land of promise*, Abram was a pilgrim; this world was never his home.

*B) God's people are STRUGGLING SINNERS:* The first half of Genesis 12 (vv1-9) is filled with glory and wonder; the second half (vv10-20) is filled with shame and defeat. We're a little shocked as we read through verses 10-20; but we shouldn't be. We see here in Abraham's life a truth we're all too familiar with: There are both highs and lows in the Christian life; there are incredible mountain-tops, but there are also dark valleys. If Genesis 12:4-9 teaches us that Christians are *new creatures* in Christ; Genesis 12:10-20 teaches us that Christians are *still a people who struggle with sin*.

Abram and his family head down to Egypt because there is a famine in the land. And along the way, Abram asks his wife Sarai to pretend she is his sister and not his wife. He does this because Sarai is so beautiful that Abram's afraid the Egyptians would kill him to take her. When they arrive, Pharaoh hears about Sarai, as Abram predicted, and takes her into his harem. Abram uses his own wife as a shield to protect himself. He gives Sarai into the arms of a pagan king to have free access to do to her as he wished.<sup>23</sup> Praise God, that wasn't the end of the story. Abram failed God, but God didn't fail Sarai. The Lord rescued her from the harem and gave her back into the arms of Abram.

What does this dark passage teach us? For one thing, it teaches us that there are no “heroes in the faith;” there are no “great men of God.” That's even an understatement. What Abram did was so bad, that he was sternly rebuked by a *pagan* king for his *moral* behavior (vv18-19) — and *then promptly deported* from the country (v20)! A lot of Christian biographies nowadays make Christian men and women out to be heroes. But the truth is, there are no Christian heroes. Even the greatest in God's kingdom are sinners who are ever prone to wander—ever in need of God's grace.

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<sup>22</sup> We could clarify that he has a new life *because* he has new desires *for* a new Lord: he's now a man of prayer and worship *because* he has a new heart that longs for God. There are two distinct doctrines here: regeneration and sanctification. Christians are a people who are being sanctified *because* they are a people who have been regenerated. Throughout Genesis, we see the Spirit's sanctifying power in the lives of His people, changing them more and more into His image. Another example is Jacob in Genesis 33. Though some take Jacob here as playing the role of a winsome diplomat, I believe this interaction with his brother Esau powerfully puts on display the grace of God that had been so deeply at work in his life. In this passage we see that Jacob had moved: 1) *from deceiving his family to defending them*: for in the past he was known for his deception, but now he not only makes himself a shield to protect his family from any harm at the hands of Esau (vv1-3), but refuses to let any harm come to them by driving them on too quickly (vv13-14); 2) *from ruling others to serving them*: for in the past, Jacob did whatever he had to, “by hook or crook,” to ensure that he would never be the one serving or bowing down to his brother, but now we see him intentionally doing just that, bowing down in v3 (cf.27:29!) and either calling himself Esau's servant or Esau his lord no less than seven times (vv4,8,13-15; cf.27:29!); 3) *from stealing blessings to giving them*: for before he had stolen the blessing from Esau, but in verse 11 he's giving blessings away (the Heb. word here for *gift* is lit. *blessing*).

<sup>23</sup> This would happen again in Genesis 20.

One way we can see Christ in the pages of the Old Testament is by observing how God's people *fail to exemplify their Savior*. In the account recorded in the second half of Genesis 12, Abram's actions are actually diametrically opposed to those of Christ. Genesis 12:13 tells us that the reason Abram told Sarai to lie was that it would go well with *him* because of her, and that *he* would live on account of her. Well, the reason Christ went to the cross was exactly the opposite: that it would go well with *us* on account of him, and that *we* would live on account of him. Abram put *his bride* in harm's way in order to protect *himself*; but Jesus put *himself* in harm's way in order to protect *his bride*.

### 3. The PROMISES of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about what we've been given in Christ*

We talked briefly about the promises God made to Abram when He called him to journey to the land of Canaan in Genesis 12:1-3; and there we described the promises as: a *land, a people, and a heritage*. But we could also summarize the promises in this way: 1) a *land*, 2) a *seed*, and 3) *blessing*. These promises are first made to Abram in Genesis 12, and then reaffirmed throughout Abram's life. The same promises are then also confirmed to Abram's son Isaac, and then to Isaac's son, Jacob:

GOD'S PROMISES	GIVEN TO ABRAHAM	CONFIRMED TO ISAAC AND JACOB
Promise of the LAND	Genesis 12:7; 13:15,17; 15:7; 17:8	Genesis 26:3-4; 28:13-14; 35:12
Promise of a SEED	Genesis 12:7; 13:16; 15:5,18; 16:10; 17:7-10; 22:17	Genesis 26:4,24; 28:13-14; 35:11-12
Promise of BLESSING	Genesis 12:2,3; (17:6);18:17-18; 22:17-18	Genesis 26:3-4,24; 28:14

Well, how are we to understand these promises? There was a TEMPORAL aspect to the promises. There was a physical *land*<sup>24</sup> that God had promised to Abram and his descendants; there would be a numerous physical *seed (or offspring)*<sup>25</sup> that would come forth from Abram; and God would lavish physical and temporal *blessings*<sup>26</sup> upon Abram. But the promises that God had made to Abram were so much more than *just* temporal promises. In a stalk of corn there is both the outer husk and the inner kernel. And so it was in the promises to Abram. There was the husk of a temporal land, seed, and blessing. But Abram understood that inside the husk was the kernel—something far more precious. Behind the temporal promises made to Abram were realities of ETERNAL significance.

A) **LAND:** In a sense, the promise God made to Abram of the land was fulfilled in the possession of Canaan during the days of Joshua (cf. Joshua 21:43-45). But the promise was always about *so much more* than just a temporal piece of land. The Scriptures make it emphatically clear that God's promise to give Abram the land looked forward to the possession of an *eternal inheritance*.

1) **The true BOUNDARIES of the land:** In Romans 4:13, Paul says: “For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.” Paul is telling us something incredibly significant here: the promise to Abram

<sup>24</sup> God promised to give the *land* of Canaan to Abram and his offspring, and this promise was fulfilled under Joshua, when he and the people of Israel crossed the Jordan and went in to take possession of the land. After recording how the land was divided up to the sons of Israel under Joshua, Scripture says, “So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the Lord gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.” (Joshua 21:43-45).

<sup>25</sup> Though Abram had no children, God also promised to give him *a seed*; not only a single child, but a numerous posterity. The Lord would multiply his descendants like the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16), the stars in the sky (15:5) and the sand on the seashore (22:17); not only making him a great nation (Genesis 12:2), but the father of a *multitude* of nations (17:4-5). God did this. God gave Abram Ishmael, and then Isaac, and other children as well (25:1-6). Ishmael became the father of twelve princes and became a great nation (17:20; cf. 25:13-15). Isaac had two sons; Esau his firstborn became the father of the Edomites; and Jacob his second-born became the father of the 12 tribes of Israel—the father of the nation of Israel. So Abram truly became the father of whole nations; God multiplied his physical offspring like the sand of the sea and the stars in the sky.

<sup>26</sup> God truly lavished rich *blessings* on Abram. One example of this is in Genesis 24, where Abram's servant goes back to Mesopotamia to find a bride for Isaac. In this passage, the servant describes his master (Abram) to Rebecca and her family in this way: “The Lord has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys” (Genesis 24:35). Abram had *hundreds* of servants (14:14). He was so prosperous that when Lot, his nephew, is taken away by a powerful army coalition made up of four kings (who had just defeated another army), Abram takes his own “trained men,” chases them down, and defeats them! Abram and his household servants put to flight entire kingdoms. So, there's no question that God had blessed Abram in a temporal sense.

concerning the land was actually something far more vast than the boundaries of the land of Canaan: God was promising Abram that he would be the heir—not just of Canaan—but, “heir *of the world*.” This teaches us that the actual scope of the land that God was promising to Abram was far more vast than just the area called Canaan. What God was promising Abram was the same thing Jesus was promising when He declared, “Blessed are the gentle, *for they shall inherit the earth*” (Matthew 5:5).

2) *The true DURATION of the land:* In Genesis 17:8, the Lord says to Abram: “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. . .” The Lord is promising here, not only to one day give the land of Canaan to Abram and his seed, but to give it to them “for an *everlasting* possession. . .” The Jews indeed possessed the land for a while, but eventually they were cast out of the land at the time of the exile. It's rather the new heavens and the new earth that the Lord has promised to give His people as an *everlasting possession*. The prophet Isaiah picks up on this truth: looking ahead to a glorified church, he says: “Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever” (60:21).<sup>27</sup>

3) *The true ENJOYMENT of the land:* The verse we read above, Genesis 17:8, tells us something else significant about the land. The Lord there had told Abram: “I will give *to you* and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings. . .” Scripture tells us here that the promise of the land was spoken to *Abram himself*, as well as his seed (cf. 13:15, 17; 15:7). Yet we're told in Acts 7:5 that, “[The Lord] gave [Abram] no inheritance in [the land], not even a foot of ground.” This is a major problem if God's promise *only* had to do with the land of Canaan in a *temporal* sense. If God promised to give Abram a land, and if the land God promised to give Abram was the physical area of Canaan, and if God never gave that land to Abram—then God failed to keep His Word. We say God did *not* fail to keep His word; because ultimately the promise was of a *heavenly inheritance*.

What Scripture would teach us is that the promise of a land was always meant to be understood as so much more than just a physical piece of property. It was never ultimately meant to be understood as a place on earth, but as a place in heaven. This is why David wrote in Psalm 37:29, “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.”<sup>28</sup> David lived *in the land* of Canaan; he reigned as king over the land promised to Abram; he was living proof that God had fulfilled His promise to Abram by giving the land of Canaan to his descendants. But David still spoke of inheriting the land as something *yet to come*: “The righteous *will* inherit the land.” Why does he put it in the future tense? Why not say: “the righteous *have* inherited the land”? Because ultimately the promise of the land was never about an earthly piece of property in the Middle East. *It looked forward to the possession of an eternal inheritance*. Abram himself understood this, as the author of the book of Hebrews makes clear: “By faith [Abram] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise, for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:9-10; cf. 13-16).

B) *SEED:* The second promise to Abraham was the promise of a *seed*. We see this in several Scriptures. For instance, in Genesis 22:17-18 the Lord said to Abraham, “indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your *seed* as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your *seed* shall possess the gate of their<sup>29</sup> enemies. In your *seed* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” So, what is this promise of a *seed* that God was making to Abram? Who is Abram's seed? Scripture gives us two answers to this question:

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<sup>27</sup> Though it's true that the Hebrew word here for *everlasting* (Heb. *olam*) has a range of meaning that includes temporary periods of time (IE, “a long time”), it's also true that this kind of meaning is incredibly rare. The word is used 438 times in the Old Testament, and while the vast majority of these occurrences take on the meaning we would normally associate with the English word for *everlasting* (IE, perpetual; without end), the times it is used in a way that would imply a long season that eventually comes to an end we could probably count on one hand. Scriptures such as Isaiah 60:21; Psalm 37; and Hebrews 11 remove any doubt as to what is meant. Ainsworth notes on Genesis 17:8: “*Everlasting*. So in Isaiah he says, 'thy people shall possess the land forever,' (Isaiah 60:21); howbeit they possessed the earthly land, 'but a little while,' (Isaiah 63:18); but the 'eternal inheritance,' was to be received by Christ, reserved in the heavens for them and us (Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:4).”

<sup>28</sup> See also verses 9, 11, 22, 34. This Psalm is absolutely jam-packed with the imagery of the righteous inheriting the land and dwelling there forever, on the one hand; but also of the wicked, on the other hand, being finally and eternally cut off from it.

<sup>29</sup> Literally in Hebrew, the text reads “*his* enemies.” We'll see the significance of the singular pronoun below.

1) *The CHILD OF PROMISE*: The promised seed at times referred to *the coming Messiah*. This is what Paul was saying in Galatians 3:16, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to *his seed*. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.” Now, just like in English, the Hebrew word “seed” (*zera*) can designate either the singular (a single person) or the plural (many people). So Paul’s point isn’t that some of the promises made to Abram of a seed were in the singular tense in Hebrew (and thus, referred to Christ). But though the Hebrew word “seed” can mean either the singular or the plural, Paul’s point here is that there *are* still times in the course of God’s promises to Abram when that word *seed* is indeed referring to a single person—to the coming Messiah.<sup>30</sup> If you remember, we saw this same principle at work in Genesis 3:15, where speaking to the serpent, the Lord says: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and *her seed*; *He* shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise *him* on the heel.” Here, the *seed* the Lord was speaking of was a particular individual; the promised Messiah, who would one day come from Eve and finally crush the serpent.<sup>31</sup> In the same way, in the course of God’s promises to Abram, there are times when the seed being promised is referring to a particular individual, to the Christ, who would come from Abram and bring blessing to the world.<sup>32</sup>

We mentioned earlier that the last clause in Genesis 12:3 was incredibly significant, where the Lord says to Abram: “And *in you* all the families of the earth will be blessed.” What is Scripture telling us here? All the families of the earth would be blessed—so far, so good—but what does it mean that they would be blessed *in Abram*? Well, thankfully, this verse is reaffirmed and clarified once again a little later, in Genesis 22:18, where the Lord tells Abram: “*In your seed* all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. . .” So how will the nations be blessed *in Abram*? They will be blessed in and through *Abram’s seed*. And here in Genesis 22:18, this *seed* is referring to a particular individual.<sup>33</sup> So, the nations would be blessed in and through a particular descendant that would one day come forth from Abram: This seed is the Messiah. All nations would be blessed *in Abram* because the Messiah was in Abram’s loins and would come forth from him. The promise God was making was that the Christ would come forth from Abram, and in and through Him, blessing would come to the nations. That’s why Paul said in Galatians 3:8: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached *the gospel* beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’” Paul calls Genesis 12:3 *the gospel* because it tells us that all the nations would be blessed *in Christ*.

<sup>30</sup> The specific passage Paul is quoting here isn’t absolutely clear. Some scholars believe Paul is referring to Genesis 13:15, and others to Genesis 17:8. The problem with these passages is it’s not immediately clear how the seed being referred to was meant to be taken as singular (indeed, the *seed* in Genesis 17:8 is modified by a plural pronoun, giving seed a plural meaning; see below). Collins follows Desmond Alexander in his article, *Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete was Paul?* Here, Collins argues that in Galatians 3:16, Paul is referring back to Genesis 22:18. I heartily concur with his reasoning, which is given in the footnotes below. If what we argue in the footnotes below is true, the implication is that, as he penned Galatians 3:16, “Paul, in alluding to [Genesis 22:18], was drawing out the meaning that was already there in the Hebrew of Genesis” (Collins’ article).

<sup>31</sup> We mentioned in our study of Genesis 3:15 (in Lesson 2), that one of the reasons we know this is the use of the pronouns that are modifying the word “seed.” We cited another Collins’ article that shows how, in Scripture, though the word seed itself in Hebrew can be either singular or plural, still we can deduce a singular or plural meaning based on the pronouns that modify “seed.” If a modifying pronoun is singular (IE, *he, his*), the seed is singular; if it is plural (IE, *they, them*), the seed is plural. In the passage in Genesis 3:15, we know that the last *seed* spoken of is singular because of its pronoun: “you shall bruise *him*”.

<sup>32</sup> In Genesis 3:15, we learned that the line of the Messiah would run through Eve; now we learn it would also run through Abram. Later, Scripture tells us that the Messiah’s lineage would run through *Isaac* (rather than Ishmael; 17:19-21; 26:4), then through *Jacob* (rather than Esau; 28:14). In Genesis 49:10, Jacob prophesies that the Messiah’s line would run through his son *Judah*. Many years later, the Lord makes the same promise in His covenant with *David*. The Lord tells king David that the Messiah would come forth as one of his descendants; which is why the Messiah was sometimes called the *son of David*.

<sup>33</sup> See the footnote dealing with Genesis 3:15 above; it’s the same principle here: Again, the pronouns associated with the *seed* indicate the meaning. In the broader context of the passage, Genesis 22:15-18, “seed” occurs three times; and though the first occurrence is clearly referring to Abram’s offspring in the *plural*, the second occurrence is just as clearly referring now to a *particular individual*. We know that this second time *seed* must be singular, because the pronoun modifying it is singular: “. . . your seed shall possess the gate of *his* enemies.” The context would dictate assuming that the seed mentioned at the beginning of verse 18 is the same seed that was mentioned just prior at the end of verse 17. Besides, the overarching narrative of Genesis (3:15; 49:10), as well as all of Scripture (Acts 2:29-31), would compel us to take seed in verse 18 as singular. How else could we make sense of Paul’s words in Galatians 3:8, that Genesis 12:3 was *the gospel*? Just as it was Christ, *the special seed*, that was referred to in Genesis 3:15, so it is again here in Genesis 22:18. Ainsworth says of Genesis 22:18, “*In thy seed*: Here the word seed is in special meant of one, that is, Christ (Galatians 3:16,18), who was both of the seed of David, and son of Abraham according to the flesh (Romans 1:3), and also ‘God over all blessed forever’ (Romans 9:5), in whom the nations do bless themselves, and glory (Jeremiah 4:2; Psalm 72:17).” And the ESV Study Bible likewise notes on Genesis 22:17-18, “The oath falls into two parts: whereas the first half focuses on Abraham’s many descendants, the second part concentrates on a single descendant who will overcome his enemies (Genesis 22:17) and mediate blessing to all the nations of the earth (v18).”

2) *The CHILDREN OF PROMISE:* So, one meaning of God's promise to Abram of a *seed* is the unique seed of promise: the coming Messiah. But there are also times in the Genesis narrative when it's clear that the promise of the *seed* is referring to a corporate group of people. God promises to make Abram's seed like the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16), the stars in the sky (15:5) and the sand on the seashore (22:17) in abundance.<sup>34</sup> This is a vast company of people. And in Genesis 17:7, we are told of their defining characteristic. Here, the Lord says to Abram: "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your descendants after you.*" This is the mark of Abram's seed; the Lord would be their God. Just as He was Abram's God, He would be the God of Abram's seed.

But who is *this seed* referring to? We might assume that it means all the children of Abram. But the narrative of Genesis goes on to explain that the promised seed wasn't necessarily each and every child without exception. In Genesis 17:19, while announcing the birth of Isaac, the Lord tells Abraham: "Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." Later, the Lord made clear to Abraham what this really meant, when He told him: "through Isaac your descendants shall be named." (Genesis 22:12).<sup>35</sup> In other words, the lineage of that seed God had promised to Abram would be traced through Isaac—but not through Ishmael. And later, we come to find out that the lineage of the promised seed would be traced through Isaac's son Jacob, but not through Esau.<sup>36</sup> What we learn from this is that the seed God had promised to Abram was *not all of his descendants without exception*; rather, the seed God had promised to Abram was *a distinct group among them*.<sup>37</sup>

Some of the Jews in Jesus' day saw this truth in Scripture, but they misunderstood it. They saw that God chose Isaac and his descendants, not Ishmael; and then they saw that God chose Jacob and his descendants, rather than Esau. And who were the Jews? They were the descendants of Jacob! They were the ones who had been chosen. And so they loved this truth. They basked in the fact that it wasn't all of Abraham's descendants who were truly the people of God. The way they saw it, the true seed didn't go through Ishmael, but Isaac; and it didn't go through Esau, but Jacob; and since they were the offspring of Jacob, they thought that they were the true, distinct, promised seed of Abram. This is why the Jews said to Jesus in John 8:33, "We are Abraham's descendants. . ." What were they saying? "Jesus, why are you talking to us as if we don't know God? We are the chosen seed. We're the true seed; the seed within the seed." But what did Jesus tell them? "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. . . He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God." (John 8:37,47). These words would have been absolutely shocking; because Jesus was telling them that though physically they were children of Isaac; spiritually they were actually children of Ishmael. Physically they were the children of Jacob, but spiritually they were actually the children of Esau.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> We'll see from the rest of the paragraph that there is actually a dual aspect in the seed promise: God made promises *of* this innumerable seed to Abram—but He also made promises *to* this innumerable seed. *God was not just making promises of an offspring to Abram; He was also making promises to Abram's offspring.* God promised *to give the land of Canaan*—not just to Abram—but also to his seed (12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8). God promised *to establish His covenant*—not just with Abram—but also with his seed (17:7). God promised not only *to be the God* of Abram—but also to be the God of his seed (17:7-8).

<sup>35</sup> The Lord later reaffirms this promise to Isaac himself in Genesis 26:3-5; and Paul quotes it in Romans 9:7 (see below).

<sup>36</sup> See Genesis 28:10-15, where the same promises God had made to Abram are extended here to Jacob (cf. Romans 9:6-13).

<sup>37</sup> This is the truth Paul was getting at in Romans 9:6-8. Here he says: "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed, but: 'through Isaac your seed will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants." Haldane says of Romans 9:7, "The promise to Abraham and his seed was not made to him and all his descendants in general, but to him and a particular seed. . . from the beginning a distinction had been made among the descendants of Abraham, indicating that they are not all Israel which are of Israel. Only a part of that nation, which he calls a remnant (verse 27), and afterwards 'a remnant according to the election of grace' (11:5), was to participate in the spiritual blessings to be conveyed by promise."

<sup>38</sup> Not even being *Jacob's* natural children was a guarantee that you were children of God. We can learn this truth also from Romans 9:6-8 (quoted in the footnote above). Here Paul tells us *not only* that it's not all the natural children of *Abraham* who are his true children, but that it's not all the natural children of *Jacob* who are true children of Abraham, for not only are they not all children because they are Abraham's seed, but "they are not all Israel *who are descended from Israel.*" Paul's meaning is that not all of Abraham's (or Jacob's) physical offspring were truly the promised seed. He's *not* making a blanket statement that the physical seed of Abraham are not his true seed (we'll deal with this in a bit more depth below); but rather informing us that they are not "*all* children because they are Abraham's seed", nor are they "*all* Israel who are descended from Israel"; IE,



So then, being a physical descendant of Jacob never guaranteed you were the true seed of Abraham. And the New Testament tells us that the opposite was just as true: the fact that you *aren't* a physical descendant of Jacob doesn't mean *you're not* the true seed of Abraham. Paul talks about this a lot in Galatians. Now, Galatians was a letter that Paul wrote to Gentiles; these were non-Jews; those who were definitely not descendants of Abraham or Jacob. But what does Paul tell them? He says: "And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise." (Galatians 4:28). So: *The Jews*, though physically the offspring of Jacob, weren't actually Abram's children at all. *And the Gentiles*, though physically unrelated to Abram, are actually his true children. Paul is telling us that your physical lineage actually doesn't have anything to do with whether or not you're a true child of Abraham. He writes to them: "Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7); and he concludes, saying: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise." (3:29). So, who are the children of promise? Abraham's true seed are his *spiritual* descendants—a community that both *excludes* many of his physical descendants and *includes* many of his non-physical descendants. Abraham's true seed are believers in Jesus; it's as simple as that.

Now, there's one last question that arises here: If all this is true, what does it mean for *ethnic Israel*? What is Scripture telling us about how Abraham's *spiritual* seed relates to his *physical* seed? Did God's promise never actually have anything at all to do with Abraham's *physical* seed? Was God promising to Abraham a spiritual seed *instead of* a physical seed? Have believing Gentiles, in effect, now replaced the Jews as the people of God? Paul answers this question for us in *Romans 11*. Speaking of ethnic Israel, Paul says in verse 1: "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." He goes on to describe what he means in verses 17-24, where he likens Abraham and his *physical seed* to an olive tree: Abraham is the root; his physical descendants are the branches. In his analogy, some of Abraham's physical seed—ethnic Jews—were *cut off* from God's promises (as a branch from the tree) because of their unbelief in Christ; while other "wild" branches—Gentiles—were *grafted into* the olive tree (and the promises of the covenant) through faith in Jesus.<sup>39</sup> But notice what Paul is saying: God didn't cut down the whole Jewish tree and plant a new Gentile tree. Rather, He *cut off* certain branches; and *grafted in* others. What Paul is telling us is that when the Lord promised to be God to Abraham and to his seed, He *was* making promises to Abraham's *physical* offspring—just not to each and every one of them. God was never promising Abraham a spiritual seed *instead of* a physical seed—but a spiritual seed *among* his physical seed. It's just that others also of his physical seed could be *cut off* from those promises (through unbelief); and so too, Gentiles could be *grafted into* those promises (by faith). But Paul tells us there will always be a *spiritual seed* for the Lord *among Abraham's physical seed* (Romans 11:1-6). And so, it's not that the Gentiles *replaced* the Jews as the true seed of Abraham; rather, we were given the amazing privilege of *joining* them.<sup>40</sup>

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not *all* of his children according to the flesh were truly his true children according to the Spirit. As Hodge says of Romans 9:7, "Paul's immediate object is to show that natural descent from Abraham did not make a man one of his true seed." (*Romans*).

<sup>39</sup> Palmer Robertson speaks of this in *Christ of the Covenants*: "First of all, the '*grafting*' principle must be remembered. . . Any definition of the biblical significance of 'Israel' must not fail to include this dimension. 'Israel' cannot be restricted in its essence to an ethnic community. Israel must include the proselyte who does not belong to 'Israel' according to the flesh, but is absorbed into Israel by process of ingrafting. The New Testament displays an awareness of this principle when it speaks of the '*ingrafting*' of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:17,19). . . Secondly, and from the opposite perspective, the '*pruning*' principle must be noted. Not only is it possible for a new branch to be grafted into genealogical relation to Abraham. It is also possible for a natural seed of Abraham to be removed from its position of privilege. This principle also may be traced back into the earliest experience of the line of promise. To demonstrate the sovereignty of God in the electing process, it was said, 'Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated' (Rom. 9:13; cf. Mal. 1:2,3; Gen. 25:23). This concept of pruning also must be given full weight in the definition of 'Israel.' Again, 'Israel' cannot be identified merely as ethnic descendants of Abraham, for 'they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel' (Rom. 9:6). It is those who, in addition to being related to Abraham by natural descendency, also relate to him by faith, plus those Gentiles who are ingrafted by faith, that constitute the true Israel." (p40).

<sup>40</sup> Some may object to this teaching on the basis of *Romans 9:8*: "That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants." But this verse must be taken in its context; both in its immediate context of vv6-13 as well as in its larger context in Romans. In its immediate context, vv6-7 help to show what Paul means here, and as we pointed out in an earlier footnote, his intent is *not* to say: "Abraham's true seed are his spiritual seed as opposed to his physical seed." We know this, in part, because of the language he uses in vv6-7a: Paul does not say: "For they are not *any* (or *actually* or *truly*) Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they *any* (or *actually* or *truly*) children because they are Abraham's descendants. . ." Rather, he says: "For they are not *all* Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they *all* children because they are Abraham's descendants. . ." Paul is not telling us that the promise never had anything to do with

C) **BLESSING:** Along with the promise of a land and a seed, God promises to bless Abraham *and* to bless all the families of the earth through him. We read in Genesis 12:2-3, “. . .and I will bless you. . .and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Again, in Genesis 22:17-18, “indeed I will greatly bless you. . .In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. . .” The same promise is later confirmed to Isaac (26:3-4) and Jacob (28:14). So, what is this promise of blessing?

1) *First, Scripture equates the blessing of Abraham with SALVATION:* We see this in Galatians 3:8-9. Here, Paul says: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would *justify* the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be *blessed* in you.’ So then those who are of faith are *blessed* with Abraham, the believer.” In this passage, Paul refers back to the Scripture in Genesis 12:3, where the Lord tells Abram: “All the nations will be *blessed* in you”, and tells us that

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Abraham's physical descendants; he's rather simply telling us that it was not *all* of his physical descendants who were truly the seed of promise. This is confirmed by what Paul goes on to say in vv7b-13. In these verses, who, according to Paul, are the children of promise, the true seed and rightful heirs of God's promise to Abraham? Isaac (v7b) and Jacob (vv12-13); who are emphatically indeed Abraham's children according to “the flesh” (v8). Paul's intent in verse 8 is not to say that the promise never extended to Abraham's physical descendants (at all). His intent was simply to show that the promise never extended to all of his physical descendants. Isaac and Jacob were Abraham's descendants according to the flesh—but not *solely* according to the flesh; they were also of his true seed, descendants according to the Spirit. As Haldane explains: “Ishmael, who was of the bondwoman, it is said, was ‘born after the flesh.’ This denoted that though he was descended from Abraham according to the laws of nature, he was not a son of Abraham's faith. Isaac was also in a certain sense born like Ishmael after the flesh, because he was naturally descended from Abraham; but not of the flesh merely. . .He was not only a son of Abraham's flesh, but his son as born after the Spirit. . .” (*Romans* 9:8). And Murray says of this passage: “there is an ‘Israel’ within ethnic Israel. . .The Israel distinguished from the Israel of natural descent is the true Israel. They are indeed ‘of Israel’ but not coextensive with the latter.” (*Romans*, V2, p9). Vos says: “God has not chosen an association of individuals, but a people. . . And Paul teaches us that the root of this old people has continued to exist, although the majority of the branches are cut off.” (V5, p166). Calvin deals with this at length. He writes: “[Anabaptists] find this difference: those who had their origin from [Abraham's] seed were called the children of Abraham under the Old Testament; now, those who imitate his faith are called by this name. They therefore say that that physical infancy which was engrafted into the fellowship of the covenant through circumcision foreshadowed the spiritual infants of the New Testament. . .But if, as they plainly indicate, they mean that God's spiritual blessing was never promised to Abraham's physical offspring, they are gravely mistaken in this. . .the Lord promises Abraham that he will have offspring in whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3), and at the same time assures him that He will be his God and the God of his descendants (Genesis 17:7). All those who by faith receive Christ as author of the blessing are heirs of this promise, and are therefore called children of Abraham.” (*Institutes*, 4.16.12). And again: “But they will bring forward in opposition another passage of the apostle (*Romans* 9:7), where he teaches that those who are of the flesh are not children of Abraham, but that only those who are children of the promise are counted among his offspring. This seems to hint that physical descent from Abraham, to which we give some place, is nothing. But we must mark more carefully the case which the apostle is discussing there. For, intending to show the Jews how God's goodness was not bound to the offspring of Abraham, indeed that of itself such descent conferred nothing, Paul cites, by way of proof, Ishmael and Esau (*Romans* 9:6-13), who were rejected just as if they were strangers; even though they were real offspring of Abraham according to the flesh, the blessing rests upon Isaac and Jacob. . .Nevertheless, when Paul cast them down from vain confidence in their kindred, he still saw, on the other hand, that the covenant which God had made once for all with the descendants of Abraham could in no way be made void. Consequently, in the eleventh chapter [of *Romans*] he argues that Abraham's physical progeny must not be deprived of their dignity. By the virtue of this, he teaches, the Jews are the first and natural heirs of the gospel. . .Therefore, that they might not be defrauded of their privilege, the gospel had to be announced to them first. For they are, so to speak, like the first-born in God's household.” (4.16.14). Throughout *Romans*, we see Paul deeply grappling with this question: If God had made a solemn covenant with Abraham, and if that covenant was primarily about salvation in the fullest sense, and if God did not only make that covenant with Abraham but also his children after him, then how is it that salvation failed to reach every single ethnic Jew (cf. *Romans* 3:1-4; 9:1-8; and 11:1-32)? “*What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?*” (*Romans* 3:3). “*For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh. . .But it is not as though the word of God has failed. . .*” (*Romans* 9:3,6). How has God's covenant not failed? How will the fact that Israel didn't believe not nullify the promise God had made to save them? Paul gives the answer in primarily two places. Paul quotes from *Isaiah* in *Romans* 9:27, “*Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved.*” There are two truths here. Paul is saying, on the one hand, that many ethnic Jews *wouldn't* be saved. But he's also saying on the other hand, that a remnant of them *would* be. And in *Romans* 11:1-5, Paul writes, “*I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ‘Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.’ But what is the divine response to him? ‘I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.*” So, Paul's answer is that God *hasn't* actually rejected ethnic Israel—because the promises were never given to each and every physical descendant of Abraham without exception; and though the great majority of the Jews had indeed turned away from the Savior—God has and will continue to preserve a believing remnant for himself among ethnic Israel. In other words, there will always be at least a remnant of believing Jews who bow the knee to the Messiah.

this Scripture is fulfilled in the Gentiles being *justified* by faith (v8); and then again, that those who are *justified* by faith are *blessed* with Abraham (v9). So then, the *blessing of Abraham* is being equated with *justification by faith*. So, what was the blessing the Lord had promised to Abraham? It was the blessing of *justification*: It's those who are justified that enter into the promised blessing of God.<sup>41</sup>

We've now come to a complete understanding of why Paul calls Genesis 12:3 *the gospel*: Earlier we saw that the clause, "in you" referred to Christ, who would come forth from Abraham. This is *how* blessing would come to the world. In the last section, we talked about *who* this blessing would extend to; namely, not just to the believing among Abraham's physical descendants, but also to "the nations," that is, the Gentiles. Here, Paul is telling us *what* this blessing actually was; namely, the blessing of justification. So, how does Paul call Genesis 12:3 the gospel, which says: "All the nations will be blessed in you"? Because *the nations* means the Gentiles, *in you* means Christ, and *blessed* means justified. We could paraphrase it this way: In Christ, salvation will extend to people from all nations.

HOW PAUL UNPACKS THE PROMISE OF GENESIS 12:3 IN GALATIANS

GENESIS 12:3	HOW THE BLESSING WOULD COME	WHO WOULD BE BLESSED	WHAT THE BLESSING IS
THE PROMISE	"And in you..."	...all the families of the earth...	...will be blessed."
THE MEANING	In Christ (Galatians 3:16)	People from all Nations (3:7,29)	Will be Justified (3:8-9)

2) *Secondly, Scripture equates the blessing of Abraham with THE SPIRIT.* We see this later in the same chapter. In Galatians 3:13-14, Paul writes: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' – in order that *in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham* might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive *the promise of the Spirit* through faith." Earlier (vv8-9), Paul had equated the blessing of Abraham with justification; but here he equates it with *the Holy Spirit*: Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles. What is that blessing? It is the promise of the Spirit, which we receive by faith. So here, the blessing of Abraham is *the Spirit*.<sup>42</sup>

And by the way, this wasn't just an idea that started with the New Testament. Long before Paul, the prophets were announcing the same thing. We read in Isaiah 44:1-3: "But now listen, O Jacob, My servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen: Thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out *My Spirit* on your offspring and *My blessing* on your descendants.'" So then, the blessing is the Spirit; and it has now been richly poured out upon God's people in and through and because of Christ.

So then, is the blessing of Abraham *salvation* or is it *the Spirit*? It's both. *It's the blessing of salvation that is given through the Spirit.* The blessing is salvation—but that very salvation is a *gift* of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus himself said, "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing." (John 6:63).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Roberts notes on this passage: "Hence it is evident, that the Gentiles' justification by faith, is part of the blessedness promised the nations in Abraham and in his seed. They that have their sins pardoned, and their persons accepted as righteous, are blessed indeed. David speaks emphatically: 'Oh the blessedness of him whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! Oh the blessedness of the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity.'" (p346). And John Brown likewise writes of this Scripture: "Now, how was he blessed? 'To be blessed' and 'to be justified,' seem to be here used as synonymous, and it is not wonderful they should; for, how can he be blessed who is condemned of God? And how can he be otherwise than blessed who is the object of God's favor? In the declaration, then, that with him all nations should be blessed, God beforehand gave an intimation to Abraham that it was his design to justify Gentiles by believing; in other words, to make them blessed in the same way in which he had been made blessed." (*Galatians*, p122). Moo also says: "Paul closely associates, if he does not identify, the 'blessing' promised to Abraham and his descendants with justification." (*Galatians*, p200).

<sup>42</sup> Roberts says on Galatians 3:13-14, "To me this seems to be the Apostle's meaning, as to our present purpose, Christ's redemption of us from the curse, is here described, partly by *the manner of it*, [namely], Christ being made a curse for us; partly by *the effects*, or fruits of it; *more general*, that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; *more particular*, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. The promise of the Spirit being an eminent branch of the blessing of Abraham." (p345). And Moo likewise says: "Most scholars think that the parallelism of the clauses suggests that 'the promise of the Spirit' is identical to, or at least forms a part of, 'the blessing of Abraham'. . ." Though he modifies this slightly, he goes on to say: "The Spirit as the promised blessing of new covenant fulfillment is a significant prophetic theme. . .Isaiah 43 might be especially important since it brings together the words 'blessing' and 'Spirit.'" (p216).

<sup>43</sup> Scripture clearly teaches us that even faith and repentance themselves are *gifts* that God must give us (Acts 5:31; 11:18;

A FINAL WORD: So, God promised to Abram a *land*, a *seed*, and *blessing*. And though each of these had temporal aspects, ultimately they looked to the fulfillment of eternal gospel realities:

	TEMPORAL ASPECTS	ETERNAL REALITIES SIGNIFIED	PROOF FROM THE SCRIPTURES
LAND	Physical land	An eternal habitation	Gen.17:8; Ps.37; Rom.4:13; Heb.11:8-13
SEED	Physical offspring	Christ and believers in Christ	Gal.3:16 & Rom.9:6-8; Gal.3:6-9,29; 4:28
BLESSING	Physical blessing	Salvation applied by the Spirit	Acts 2:38-39; 3:25-26; Gal.3:8-9,13-14

But we could really summarize all these things in this simple way: *God's promises to Abraham were about the Savior and salvation.* God would be Abraham's God (Genesis 17:7-8). This is the heart of the promises. God would send a Messiah to redeem His people. And He would be their God.

God made promises to Abraham: *land, seed, blessing.* For much of the time, though, Abraham's experience seemed to completely contradict what God had said. God didn't fulfill the promises right away—it took time. And so Abraham had to wait on God, to trust Him to do what He said that He would. Often all that Abraham had to hang on to was what God had said, despite all evidence to the contrary. This is true of each and every promise God had made to him: *1) The promise of the LAND:* God promised to give the land of Canaan, not only to Abraham, but also to his seed. And He made this promise long before Abraham even *had any "seed"* to speak of! We can imagine Abraham thinking: "Lord, let's slow down here; I don't even have children to put in that land which you've promised to give to them!" And when Sarah dies, Abraham has to buy a plot of land from the Canaanites because he doesn't even own a single square foot (Acts 7:5). *2) The promise of a SEED:* Abraham was 75 years old when the Lord first began to promise that He would multiply his offspring. That's when God *began* to make this promise—but it wouldn't actually come to fulfillment until much, much later: Isaac wouldn't even be born for another 25 years. Romans 4 tells us that Abraham needed a lot of faith to even believe the promise to begin with as a 75 year old man (vv18-21). But he didn't just need faith to believe the promise when God made it; he also needed faith to *continue* to believe the promise as the years continued to roll by, and he was still childless. *3) The promise of BLESSING:* The Lord promised to bless Abraham and make him a blessing. But most of the time, Abraham seems to be more of a curse to his neighbors than a blessing. Twice he gives his wife over into the arms of pagan kings to protect himself (Genesis 12 and 20), which also brought judgment upon those kings and surely must have left permanent scars on his bride. He also takes his wife's maid as a second wife, which brings nothing but turmoil on his own family (Genesis 16:4-6) and in the end leaves Hagar and her son devastated, ruined and desolate. . . And yet, who can calculate now what kind of impact Abraham's life has had on bringing true and lasting blessing to the nations?

God's promise of the *land* at first seemed not to be true; God's promise of a *seed* at first seemed not to be true; and God's promise to make Abraham a *blessing* at times seemed not to be true. But God who promised was so faithful. In the same way, God has made promises to us in Christ. But just like with Abraham, what God has said often seems to contradict our daily experience. We often find ourselves living in the gap between what God has promised and what our eyes can see. What do we do? We cling to God's Word; that's what we do. There might be a lot of waiting; there might be a lot of tears; we might not understand everything. But the day is coming when we'll be able to look back, just like Abraham, and say—perhaps with tears of praise—that God who promised was so, so faithful.

#### 4. The NATURE of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how sinners come into favor with God*

So, the covenant that God made with Abram is about *the Savior and salvation.* God would send into the world a Savior who would come forth from Abram, and in and through Him, the blessings of salvation would reach to all the families of the earth: the Savior would bring salvation to God's people. But exactly *how* would He do that? How exactly does God save His people? We talked

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Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:25). What this means is that faith and repentance are utterly impossible until the Holy Spirit is given to us. This is why sinners are not saved by trying harder to believe and repent, but by calling upon Jesus. When we call upon Christ, He freely gives us the Holy Spirit—and once this happens, to *not* believe and repent is what is utterly impossible.

about this in God's covenant with Noah, and we're going to see the same thing here that we saw with Noah: *Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.*<sup>44</sup> That's how God saves His people. It wasn't any different for Abraham than it is for us today. God's people in the Old Testament weren't saved in any other way than the way we're saved today. There's only one Savior and there's only one way of salvation, and that is by *grace* alone through *faith* alone in *Christ* alone.

*A) God freely lavishes His favor on sinners by GRACE alone:* Abraham was an object of God's favor all his life. But he never deserved any of it. That's what grace is. God dealt with Abraham in *grace*. Now, that doesn't mean that God never gave Abraham any commands to obey. In Genesis 17:1, for example, the Lord says to Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless." God called Abraham to live a holy life; to be blameless; to walk before Him. God gave him commands. *But God's favor towards Abraham was never based on Abraham keeping those commands.* God's disposition towards him was never based on Abraham fulfilling certain conditions. We see this in the way that God made the promises to Abraham. God never came to him saying, "Abraham, IF you obey Me and live a holy life and walk blamelessly before Me, THEN I will confirm these promises to you." Or: "If you CONTINUE to obey Me and live a holy life, I will CONTINUE to confirm My promises to you." The promises God made to him were *unconditional*: "I will give [this land] to you and to your descendants forever" (13:15); "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth" (13:16); "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you" (17:6). God simply made promises to Abraham; there were no conditions attached.

Even Abraham's sin couldn't nullify or revoke God's promises. Remember what happened in the last half of *Genesis 12*? Abraham had used his wife as a shield to protect himself. His behavior was so bad they had him deported (12:19-20). So, in his first test since entering Canaan, Abraham fell flat on his face. How does God respond? Does He revoke the promises He made back in Genesis 12? (Or at least threaten to revoke them if Abraham doesn't shape up?) No. Rather, God continues to reaffirm those promises to Abraham throughout the rest of his life (13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 22:15-19). Then, later, in *Genesis 20*, we find Abraham doing the same thing again: He leaves the land of Canaan, he introduces his wife as his sister, and once again, she ends up in a king's harem—probably for quite some time.<sup>45</sup> When everything comes to light, Abraham is again severely rebuked by a pagan king (vv8-10). Now, this was anywhere from 15-25 years after the first time this had happened in Genesis 12. Abraham is a mature believer now. He knows better. But here in Genesis 20, we find him, yet again, relapsing back into his old sins. Well, how is God going to respond *this* time? The chapter headings say it all: "Genesis 20: *Abraham's treachery*. Genesis 21: *Isaac is born*." In other words: God fulfills His promise to Abraham—not at the height of his obedient faith—but in the midst of the very worst of his sin and failure. *That's* how God responds to Abraham's sin. Are you amazed? You should be. This is the gospel. God's covenant mercies were never mediated by Abraham's obedience, nor could they ever be nullified by his sin. God's blessing didn't come to him apart from his sin—but *in the midst of it*. He would at times fail God, but God would never fail him.

Fact is, Abraham couldn't get away from God's mercies. No matter what he did; no matter how hard he seemed to try. At times he wandered away from the Lord; at times he fell flat on his face. But he could never get away from God's blessing or nullify the promises God made to him.<sup>46</sup> Abraham had good days, and he had bad days, but God's blessing never went up and down based on his obedience. And it's the same for you if you belong to Christ. Your sin can never nullify God's promises to you, because God's promises to you were never conditional on your obedience to His commands. God's blessing doesn't stop when we stumble and fall—it continues and runs through even our worst failures. This is what the gospel is all about. God lavishes His blessing upon weak Christians who continue to fall flat on our faces. Like Abraham, we too will have good days, and we will have bad days: "But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him." (Psalm 103:17).

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Burgess puts it this way in his work, *The Vindication of the Law*: "There are these three main concurrent causes to our justification: *The grace of God* as the efficient, *Christ* as the meritorious, and *faith* as the instrumental." (Burgess, p23).

<sup>45</sup> Genesis 20:17-18 hint at this. Abraham here prays for Abimelech, after which God again opens up the wombs of his wife and maids to bear children again (for the Lord had closed all their wombs from the time Sarah had been taken into the harem). Now, if the closing of the wombs of the women in the palace was noticeable, Sarah must have been there some time.

<sup>46</sup> We could describe all this in just two words, the words recorded at the beginning of Genesis 20:3, after Abraham's grievous sin: "But God." Abraham failed God again and again. *But God* never, ever failed to keep His promise to Abraham.

*B) God freely lavishes His favor on sinners through FAITH alone:* How was it that Abraham was able to enter into these covenant mercies, and live out all of his days under the blessing and favor of God? We're given the answer in Genesis 15:6. We'll be looking at Genesis 15 in more detail later, but let's just look at this verse together now. The Lord had just promised in verses 4-5 that He would multiply Abraham's descendants like the stars of the heavens. We then read in verse 6: "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is the first time in the Bible where *faith* is explicitly joined together with *justification*; it's the first time that we're told that the way justification happens is *through faith*.<sup>47</sup> When and how was it that God credited righteousness to Abraham? When he *believed* God's Word—that's all he did.<sup>48</sup> The truth in this single verse is so important that the New Testament quotes it *four times*. For instance, Paul says in Galatians 3:6-7: "Even so Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness.' Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." (cf. Romans 4:3,22 and James 2:23). So, justification comes about through faith. We could note here a few things in particular about faith:

*1) Faith is alone.* Paul writes in Romans 4:3-5, saying: "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. *But to the one who does not work, but believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. . . ." Paul here quotes from the passage in Genesis 15:6 and draws out one implication for us: Abraham was not justified by a combination of faith in Jesus plus his own obedience. Genesis tells us that Abraham was justified by faith, and Paul clarifies that he was justified by faith *alone*.<sup>49</sup> Notice how Paul puts it. Paul *doesn't* say: "But to the one who does not **ONLY** work, but **ALSO** believes. . . ." Rather, he puts them at a complete contrast: "But to the one who does **NOT** work, **BUT** believes. . . ." In other words, Paul is not saying: "**NOT ONLY** works, **BUT ALSO** faith." Rather, he's actually saying: "**NOT ALSO** works, **BUT ONLY** faith." It's not just that we're justified by faith—Paul's point is that we're justified by faith *alone*.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> From Ligon Duncan course on *Covenant Theology*. Jonathan Edwards puts it this way: "[with Abraham] the great condition of the covenant of grace, which is faith, was now more fully made known" (*A History of Redemption*). With Noah, we're told later in Hebrews that he was made righteous *by faith*. But here with Abraham it is clear from Genesis itself (15:5-6). Another Old Testament passage that connects faith and justification is Habakkuk 2:4: "but the righteous shall live by faith."

<sup>48</sup> Someone may ask: *Why is Scripture only now describing Abraham's justification? Wasn't Abraham already justified at this point?* Calvin answers in his note on Genesis 15:6: "We must now notice the circumstance of *time*. . . by a consideration of the time in which this was said to Abram, we certainly gather. . . that holy men are only justified by faith, as long as they live in the world. If any one object, that Abram previously believed God, when he followed Him at His call, and committed himself to His direction and guardianship, the solution is ready; that we are not here told *when* Abram first began to be justified, or to believe in God; but that in this one place it is declared, or related, *how* he had been justified through his whole life. For if Moses had spoken thus immediately on Abram's first vocation, the cavil of which I have spoken would have been more specious; namely, that the righteousness of faith was only *initial* (so to speak) and not perpetual. But now since after such great progress, he is still said to be justified by faith, it thence easily appears that the saints are justified freely even unto death. . . ."

<sup>49</sup> Paul makes this even more clear in Galatians 2:16, where he says: "nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." See also Romans 4:13. In the broader passage of Romans 4:1-15, we could also note that Paul shows that God's promise of salvation is to be received, in particular, through faith alone *apart from works* (vv1-8), *apart from circumcision* (vv9-12), and *apart from the Law* (vv13-15).

<sup>50</sup> As Motyer puts it: "Abraham takes a second wife and has a child, Ishmael. . . But God simply disallows this device. He will not permit Abraham to contribute to the fulfilling of the divine promises. When Abraham does seem to make a contribution, when he and Sarah have a child by the ordinary processes which God has ordained, the narrative is very careful to tell us that he does so *totally* by the enabling of God. God fulfills his promises in his own time, in his own way, and by his own power. The covenant points to a salvation which is all of God; man is in no position to contribute or to co-operate." (*Covenant and Promise*). This Scripture (Romans 4:3-5) speaks of God justifying "the ungodly" (v5) by faith. Here the unrighteous man, who even has no works to speak of, without and apart from any moral uprightness or religious deeds, simply believes in Jesus—and is justified. It is a slightly different truth in Galatians 3:11, where Paul quotes from Habakkuk 2:4 (see also Romans 1:17). Here, Paul tells us: "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, *'the righteous man shall live by faith.'*" In Romans 4, it's an ungodly man who is justified by faith, but here in Galatians 3:11, it's actually "the righteous man" who is also justified by faith. What is the significance? It is a beautiful truth: We enter into God's favor at the beginning by faith alone, completely apart from works. But it's also true that even a mature Christian man who has learned to walk with the Lord and has begun, out of love for Christ and a desire for his glory, to engage in good works—yet still, even that man always and forever continues to be justified not by those works—but only through faith in Christ; for even *the righteous man* shall still be justified *by faith*. So, faith alone isn't just what justifies us at the beginning; faith alone is what continues to justify us till our dying breath. Anthony Burgess has some wonderful sayings on this point as well in his *Vindication of the Law*. He says: "Take notice of this, that justification by works does not only exclude the works of the Law, but all works of the gospel, yea,

2) *Faith is instrumental.* Again, speaking of faith, Paul tells us in Romans 4:13, “For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but *through* the righteousness of faith.” The Greek preposition that Paul chooses to use here has a very particular meaning attached to it:<sup>51</sup> It's clear Paul is telling us that this promise given to Abraham was received *through* (or *by*) faith, as opposed to *because of* his faith or *on the basis of* his faith. This is the way that Paul consistently speaks: we're not justified *on the basis of* our faith; we're simply justified *through* faith. In other words, faith isn't meritorious; it's simply *instrumental*. Faith isn't why we're justified; it's simply *how* we're justified. Faith isn't the cause of our justification; it's simply *the means*. Abraham didn't *achieve* God's blessing because his faith was so great; he simply *received* the promise God was making to him, through simple faith in His Word. This is important, because sometimes it's almost as though we start trying to turn faith into another kind of work—something we must do, or attain to. But Scripture tells us that God's favor isn't something that can be *achieved*. Entering into God's covenant mercies isn't something that's even *achieved by faith*—rather, it's simply *received by faith*. God holds out His promises to us as a free gift. We simply open our hand and take them.<sup>52</sup>

3) *Faith can be weak.* As we read through the Genesis narrative, we see that Abraham's faith in God was constantly going up and down. At the beginning of Genesis 12, he has enough faith in the Lord to leave everything he knows behind, and take his family to the land where God was calling him. But by the end of the same chapter, he doesn't even have enough faith in God to be honest and tell the Egyptians that Sarah was his wife. In Genesis 15, the Lord promises to give Abraham a son, and we read in verse 6 that he believes in the Lord. But in the very next chapter, we see Abraham and Sarah struggling in faith, starting to think maybe they needed to help God out with His promise. And so, Abraham takes Sarah's maid Hagar as another wife, in order that God's promise of an offspring might be reckoned through her, because they couldn't believe at that point that God could really still give Abraham a son through Sarah. So, sometimes Abraham's faith seems unwavering; but other times it seems almost non-existent! Abraham was a man of faith—but even his faith was *never* a perfect faith. And this is so comforting for us. Isn't it good news that it's not the *amount* of our faith that brings us into God's favor, but the *object* of our faith. As one put it: “A little faith in the Lord Jesus saves.”<sup>53</sup>

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and the works of grace also.” (p21). Again: “we know, that the Apostle excludes the works of David and Abraham, that they did in obedience to the Law, to which they were enabled by grace; so necessary is it in matter of justification and pardon to exclude all works, anything that is ours. . .” (pp233-34). And lastly: “Why is that doctrine of making Angels and Saints mediators and intercessors so odious, but because it joins Christ and others together in that great work? Do you not [do] the like, when you join your love and grace with Christ's obedience? . . . Idolatry make[s] the works of Christ, a Christ.” (pp25-26).

<sup>51</sup> This Greek preposition (Gr. *dia*) can be used in two different ways, which in turn, give it two different meanings. When it's used in the *accusative* tense, it takes on the meaning of “on account of,” or “because of”; whereas when it's used in the *genitive* tense, it takes on the meaning of “through,” or “by means of.” Paul consistently uses *dia* in the genitive when speaking of faith.

<sup>52</sup> Colquhoun puts it this way: “It is one thing, to be justified *by* faith, merely as an instrument by which, a man receives the righteousness of Christ; and another, to be justified *for* faith, as an act or work of the law. If a sinner, then, rely on his actings of faith, or works of obedience to any of the commands of the law, for a title to eternal life; he seeks to be justified by the works of the law, as really as if his works were perfect. If he depend, either in whole or in part, on his faith and repentance, for a right to any promised blessing; he thereby, so annexes that promise to the commands to believe and repent, as to form them for himself, into a covenant of works.” (*Treatise of the Law and Gospel*, p25). And again he says: “All indeed who, according to the covenant of grace, attain justification, are justified *by* faith; but, it is one thing to be justified *by* faith, as merely the instrument of justification; and another, to be justified *for* faith, as an act, or work, affording a *title* to justification. It is one thing, for faith as an act of obedience, and as being seminally all sincere obedience, to *give* a title to justification; and a very different thing, for faith as a mean[s] or instrument, to *receive* a title to it. Faith, according to the gospel, gives no manner of title, to the smallest blessing of the everlasting covenant; but it receives the surety-righteousness of the second Adam, which gives a full title to every one of them.” Burgess likewise says: “Now to set up works is to oppose faith, as the Apostle argues; therefore faith, as it is a work, is to be opposed to itself, as it is an instrument justifying.” (p24). And again, Burgess writes: “[Justification] is not, because of the dignity of faith, but by Christ. You see the hyssop (or whatever it was) which did sprinkle the blood, was a contemptible herb, yet the instrument to represent great deliverance.” (*Vindication of the Law*, p28).

<sup>53</sup> Watson speaks of this in his *Body of Divinity*: “We must distinguish between weakness of faith and no faith. A weak faith is true. The bruised reed is but weak, yet it is such as Christ will not break. Though thy faith be weak, be not discouraged. 1) A weak faith may receive a strong Christ. A weak hand can tie the knot in marriage as well as a strong one; and a weak eye might have seen the brazen serpent. The woman in the gospel did but touch Christ's garment, and received virtue from him. It was the touch of faith. 2) The promise is not made to strong faith, but to true. The promise says not whosoever has a giant-faith, that can remove mountains, that can stop the mouths of lions, shall be saved; but whosoever believes, be his faith ever so small. Though Christ sometimes chides a weak faith, yet that it may not be discouraged, he makes it a promise. . . (Matt. 5:5). 3) A weak faith may be fruitful. Weakest things multiply most; the vine is a weak plant, but it is fruitful. Weak Christians may have strong affections. How strong is the first love, which is after the first planting of faith! 4) Weak faith may be growing. Seeds spring up by degrees; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. Therefore, be not discouraged. God

C) *God freely lavishes His favor on sinners in CHRIST alone:* God's favor comes by grace alone through faith alone. But this faith is not just faith in God in general. God's favor comes through faith in *Jesus Christ*. Salvation only comes through *the Savior*. We can see this in a few different ways:

1) *First, Jesus is the SEED that God promised.* We saw this earlier. Jesus is *the seed* that God promised to Abraham—the seed through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It's only in Christ, Abraham's true seed, that God's blessing flowed to Abraham himself and then would flow to all the nations. All the promises that God made to Abraham are only fulfilled in Christ.

2) *Secondly, Jesus is the SAVIOR that Abraham trusted.* We've seen that Abraham was a sinner—and yet God dealt with him in grace. But how could God do that? If Abraham was truly a guilty sinner, and if God is just and will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Nahum 1:3), then how could God deal with Abraham in grace *without compromising His justice?* The answer is that the day was coming that Jesus would go to the cross to take all the punishment of all those who belong to Him—including Abraham.<sup>54</sup> Abraham was *a believer in Christ*. That's why Jesus said to the Jews in John 8:56, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” That's why we find Abraham building altars and offering up burnt offerings. He was acknowledging his sin and his need for atonement. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away his sin, but they pointed forward to the One who would. Abraham looked forward to the coming Savior, the lamb of God.<sup>55</sup>

3) *Thirdly, Jesus is the SUBSTANCE that the narratives fore-pictured.* Genesis doesn't just point us to Christ through the *promises* God was making. Throughout Genesis, we're also pointed to Christ through the various *pictures* Scripture was setting before us. In particular, Scripture sets forth both Abraham and Isaac, not only as believers in Christ, but as pictures of Christ, in the following ways:

A) ISAAC is set forth as a picture of Christ's SUFFERINGS: Genesis 22 tells the story of how God tested Abraham, asking him to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering. It is a remarkable testimony of Abraham's faith; that he was willing to give up to the Lord what was most precious to him in all the world. But this narrative also serves in many ways to point us forward to the cross: Just as it was with Isaac, Christ was God's beloved son; the son of promise; His “only” son (*verse 2*). And just like with Isaac, Jesus was given a load of wood to carry up a mountain; it was given to him by his father, and he was to be offered up upon it on the mountain (*verse 6*). Just like Isaac, who walked with his father and even submitted himself to being bound by his father on the mountain, so too Christ raised no objections to the plan and purpose of his father, but submitted himself entirely to Him, even to the point of death (*verse 9*). And Hebrews tells us that Abraham received Isaac back from the dead as a type of Christ's death and resurrection (*verse 13*; cf. Hebrews 11:19).<sup>56</sup> It's significant that, at the end of the narrative, Abraham names that place, “The Lord Will Provide” (*verse 14*). Why not name it, “The Lord *Did* Provide”? Probably because Abraham himself understood that these events were

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who would have us receive them that are weak in faith, will not himself refuse them. Rom. 14:4: A weak believer is a member of Christ; and though Christ will cut off rotten members from his body, he will not cut off weak members.” (Watson, p220).

<sup>54</sup> This is exactly what Paul is saying in Romans 3:23-26: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed, for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*” Paul is explaining how it is that God could pass over the sins of Old Testament believers and yet not compromise His justice: He didn't sweep their sins under the rug and pretend they weren't so bad. God dealt in full with Abraham's sin; it's just that instead of punishing Abraham for his sin, God punished His own Son in his place.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Roberts draws this truth out from the Scripture we've been looking at, Genesis 15:6. He writes: “Abraham the father of all believers was justified; not by a general faith, assenting to God's Word as true in general, but by a particular faith. . .He believed in the Lord; which here notes, not only assent, but also particular application of it to himself by affiance, trust, confidence, recumbency, etc, in the Lord. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.” (Roberts, p579).

<sup>56</sup> Bruce Waltke describes the narrative in Genesis 22 in this way: “Within the canon of Scripture, the story of Abraham's willingness to obediently sacrifice his son of promise typifies Christ's sacrifice. Abraham's declaration that 'God himself will provide the lamb' (22:8) resonates with God's offer of the Lamb to save the world. . .Like Isaac, Christ is a lamb led to the slaughter, yet he does not open his mouth. Just as Isaac carries his own wood for the altar up the steep mount, Christ carries his own wooden cross toward Golgotha (see John 19:17). Just as Abraham sacrificially and obediently lays Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22:9), so Christ sacrificially and obediently submits to his father's will. . .Symbolically, Abraham receives Isaac back from death, which typifies Christ's resurrection from the death of the cross (Heb. 11:19).” (Waltke, *Genesis*, pp210-11).



ultimately looking forward to something else still yet to come.<sup>57</sup> Later, we learn that this same place, Mount Moriah, was actually the very place the temple would be built. We read in 2 Chronicles 3:1, “Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord *in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. . .*” It would be here that God would provide sacrifices of atonement for the many sins and failures of His people. But, ultimately, even those offerings point us forward further still, to *Christ*. Abraham can tell us that the Lord *will* provide because he was looking forward to the promised Messiah—the One who would provide for His people in a way that his son and the ram only faintly fore-pictured. Abraham looked forward to the lamb of God who, through his sufferings, would take away the sin of the world.<sup>58</sup>

B) ABRAHAM is set forth as a picture of Christ's OBEDIENCE: Isaac isn't the only type of Christ in Genesis 22. Abraham is also set forth as a type of Christ—only in a different way. Isaac serves to picture *Christ in his sufferings*; Abraham serves to picture *Christ and his obedience*. We see this in Genesis 22:18, where, after Abraham had offered up the ram, the Lord declares to him: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” Earlier, we saw that Christ was the promised seed, through whom blessing would come to the nations. But we also see Christ here in another way. Towards the end of the verse, we're told that *the nations* would be blessed because of *Abraham's obedience*. What do we make of this? Scripture clearly tells us that Abraham inherited the promises by grace *alone* through faith *alone*—emphatically *not* on the basis of his obedience—indeed, the two are completely mutually exclusive systems (Romans 4:13-16; Galatians 3:16-18). So how are we to interpret these words? We interpret them the same way we did with Noah. Remember how the Lord had told Noah in Genesis 7:1 that his entire household was to enter the ark, but that *they* were only saved because *he alone* was righteous? Noah was a picture of Christ, in that his entire family was saved only because of and through and in union with him.<sup>59</sup> So it is here with Abraham. Notice what God is saying: NOT: “Abraham, *you* will be blessed because *you* have obeyed My voice”; NOR: “*the nations* will be blessed because *they* will obey My voice”; BUT: “Abraham, *the nations* will be blessed because *you* have obeyed My voice.” This is not a personal, merited righteousness—but a covenantal, imputed righteousness. Scripture is giving us a glimpse of the truth that *the nations would enter into God's blessing on the basis of the obedience of another*. Here Abraham serves as a type of Christ: *we* (the nations) are blessed because *he* (Jesus) obeyed.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> This insight about the future tense of v14 and its implications was gratefully gleaned from Tim Cain (Kaleo Church, CA).

<sup>58</sup> Isaac is an eminent type of Christ in other ways as well. We see Christ, also, in *the birth of Isaac*, when we consider that: 1) the birth of Isaac came about as the direct fulfillment of God's promise (as with Christ); 2) the birth of Isaac only took place after much waiting and longing for the promise (as with Christ); 3) the birth of Isaac took place at the precise appointed time God had set (18:14; 21:12; as with Christ, cf. Galatians 4:4); 4) the birth of Isaac was miraculous (as with the virgin birth); 5) and the birth of Isaac brought great joy to some (IE, Sarah) but distress to others (IE, Hagar and Ishmael who are then cast out; as it was with Christ, cf. Luke 2:34). We also see Christ in *the marriage of Isaac* recorded in Genesis 24. Here the father (Abraham) commissions his servant with the great task of bringing home a bride for his son (Isaac). And this is a beautiful picture of our mission as God's people: God the Father has thus commissioned His servants with the great task of bringing home a bride for His Son, Jesus—this is what our mission is—to bring home the bride of Christ from among the nations.

<sup>59</sup> Noah served both to show us *how* God deals with believers (on the basis of grace alone) as well as *why* God deals with believers the way He does (as a type of the second Adam in his covenant headship). On the one hand, Noah is a sinner saved by grace. But on the other hand, he is a type of Christ the second Adam in that his whole family was saved only because of and through and in union with him. So it is here with Abraham. He is a sinner saved by grace, but he's also a picture here of the second Adam, as Paul wrote in Romans 5:18-19: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners, *even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.*”

<sup>60</sup> Bruce Waltke puts it this way in his commentary on *Genesis*: “Abraham's obedience prefigures the active obedience of Christ, who secures the covenantal blessings for Abraham's innumerable offspring.” (p311). *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* likewise affirms this truth: “Abraham's obedience prefigured the active obedience of Christ, who secured the covenantal blessings for Abraham's innumerable offspring who share his faith in the God who gives life to the dead.” It might be argued at this point that this is irrefutable Scriptural evidence that God fulfills His promises to us by means of our faith *plus* our obedience. For God had promised this same thing earlier to Abraham, and now, along with this same promise, the Lord adds this qualification: “because you have obeyed My voice.” So that it seems that it was not truly by faith alone (as we've been advocating) that Abraham received and inherited the promises, but a mixture of his faith and his obedience; indeed, faith *plus* obedience. To this objection, we would cite another Scripture a few chapters later. For the Lord uses the very same language in telling Isaac the same truth, when He declares to him in Genesis 26:4-5: “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; *because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.*” Now, this Scripture fully refutes the objection; for it uses the very same language to teach us something completely different than what is alleged to be taught in Genesis 22:18. Thus, Genesis 26:4-5 helps us to truly and rightly interpret Genesis 22:18. And what we find is this: In Genesis 22:18, we're told that the nations would be blessed because Abraham obeyed the Lord. But notice what is said in

THE LORD'S WORDS TO ABRAHAM IN GENESIS 22:18

NOT	“Abraham, YOU will be blessed because <i>you</i> obeyed My voice”	A Personal Righteousness
NOR	“Abraham, <i>the nations</i> will be blessed because THEY will obey My voice”	
BUT	“Abraham, <i>the nations</i> will be blessed because <i>you</i> obeyed My voice”	A Covenantal Righteousness

Don't we often begin to think that God blesses us as Christians when and as we obey Him and keep His commandments? Now, God wants us to obey Him and keep His commandments! And we'll talk more about that ahead. But isn't it freeing, isn't it wonderful to know that, actually, God blesses us, not on the basis of our obedience, but because of *the obedience of another*? The truth is, God's blessing flows to us because of Jesus. God continues every day to pour out His full blessing upon us in the midst of, and despite our many sins (*by grace alone*). What's more, He continues to pour out this blessing upon us completely apart from any of our Christian obedience (*by faith alone*). And He does so because Jesus paid your sin debt in full and His righteousness has now been credited to you (*in Christ alone*). God's blessing wasn't based on Abraham's spiritual achievements in the Christian life. It wasn't based on his obedience, or on his devotion, or even on his feelings. It wasn't based on him at all. And it's the same for us in Christ. God's favor is based on His promise to bless all those who belong to Jesus. We didn't earn God's favor at conversion. We don't earn it now by trying to be good Christians. We never deserved it in the first place, and we never will. But if you belong to Jesus, then God's favor is upon you, and just like Abraham, you won't be able to get away from it.

	ITS OBJECTS	ITS BASIS	ITS MEANS	ITS SOURCE
MAN'S WAY	God blesses <i>good people</i>	By some <i>merit achieved</i>	Obtained through <i>good works</i>	Of <i>the Law</i>
GOD'S WAY	God blesses <i>real sinners</i>	Only by <i>grace received</i>	Freely given through <i>faith alone</i>	In <i>Christ</i>

5. The STABILITY of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about the security we have in Christ*

Earlier we referenced the Lord's words to Abram in Genesis 15:1. This is where the Lord comes to him and says: “Do not fear, Abram. I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.” We talked about God's promise here in the context of the Tower of Babel; Abram didn't need to seek *security* anywhere else because God was his shield; and he didn't need to seek *significance* anywhere else because the Lord was promising rewards greater than he could dream. Well, we talked about this verse (15:1), but what we haven't talked about is the context in which the Lord spoke these words to Abraham. What was it? Well, the background of Genesis 15 is Genesis 14. And Genesis 14 is the account of how Lot was taken captive by an invading army, and how in response, Abram and his servants went after them, and overtook and overpowered them, and rescued Lot and many others, and brought them safely back home. At the end of the account, the king of Sodom tells Abram to take all the possessions that he had rescued as compensation. But Abram is afraid that if he takes anything, *the king of Sodom* would take credit for making him prosperous. So Abram says no—he refuses to take anything. And it's “after these things” that the Lord comes to Abram in Genesis 15:1 and says, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.” So, what's the lesson? It's not just that God knows how to protect and reward His people. It's more than that. God is telling Abram that his integrity hasn't gone unnoticed. God was watching. Abram wasn't living with integrity for nothing. I think sometimes we get weary because we forget this. And so, the Lord wants to remind Abram, and to remind us, that He is watching, and that He sees every little thing we do for His sake—and not even the smallest thing we do in His name will go unrewarded (Matthew 10:42).<sup>61</sup>

Genesis 26:4-5; here, the Lord tells Isaac that the nations would be blessed—once again—because *Abraham* obeyed the Lord. Now, if the intended meaning of Genesis 22:18 was that Abraham inherited the promises in and through his obedience, then we would find the Lord affirming the same truth to Isaac; but here with Isaac we find the Lord affirming a completely different truth. For in Genesis 26:4-5, the Lord does *not* tell Isaac, as He had told Abraham: the nations will be blessed because you, Isaac, have obeyed Me. But to the contrary, the Lord tells Isaac: the nations will be blessed because *Abraham* obeyed Me. Isaac is blessed, and the nations are blessed—not because of their *own* obedience—but because of the obedience of *Another*.

<sup>61</sup> It's the same truth Paul writes of in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” And when is it that we are tempted to *lose heart*? It's when we start thinking, *It doesn't matter; it's not doing anything; it's all for nothing*. But what we have to see is this phrase: “*in due time* we will reap. . .” *In due time* we will reap.

Well, in response to the Lord's words in Genesis 15:1, Abram says, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (v2). God had promised to give children to Abram (12:7). In fact, at this point, the Lord hadn't just promised to give Abram offspring; He had sworn to him: "I will make your descendants *as the dust of the earth*, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered." (13:15-16). But, probably years had gone by and Abram still didn't have *any* children. And so Abram is wrestling here with God in prayer between the promise that God had made on the one hand, but on the other hand the present reality that he still had no children, and he wasn't getting any younger: "Lord, you've promised multitudes. . .but You've yet to give me a single child." It's not that Abram didn't believe what God had said. It's that he *did* believe what God had said, but the reality of his present situation stood in direct opposition to God's promise.<sup>62</sup> So Abram is being honest here with God in prayer: "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." (15:3). Abram isn't accusing God; he's just honestly wrestling.<sup>63</sup> He's being honest with the Lord as he fights to believe His promise. And it's *as he wrestles with God in prayer* that God confirms His promise to him:

<sup>4</sup> Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.' <sup>5</sup> And He took him outside and said, 'Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' <sup>6</sup> Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. <sup>7</sup> And He said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.' (Genesis 15:4-7).

So God confirms His promise to Abram; and Abram *believes in the Lord* (15:6). We've already looked at this verse and shown how it's a central passage that the New Testament quotes to prove that justification comes about through faith. And even as Abram believes God's promise in *verse 6*, God reminds him in *verse 7* that even his own faith was ultimately due to God's electing grace. We saw this truth earlier: Abram only believed in the Lord because the Lord had first chosen him. Even our faith is a gift of God. We don't believe because we chose Him; *we believe because He chose us*.<sup>64</sup>

But Abram continues to wrestle with God in prayer. We pick up again with Genesis 15:8 and read:

<sup>8</sup> He said, 'O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?' <sup>9</sup> So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' <sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. <sup>11</sup> The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away . . . . <sup>17</sup> It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. . . (Genesis 15:8-11, 17-18).

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Not right now. Now is the time to sow. You see this even in the Greek: *Verse 9*: Later will be the *time* (Gr. *kairos*) for reaping. *Verse 10*: But *now* is the *time* (Gr. *kairos*) for sowing. We get discouraged because it's hard work sowing, and all we're doing is sowing; and never reaping. Farmers sow for a month then they get to see the harvest at the end of the year. All our life we're sowing but we don't get to reap a single sheaf. That is, until after we've sown our last seed, and we ourselves are sown in the ground, and we arise at the Resurrection. *Then, then, then*—we will get to reap. And it is not a probability, it's a certainty: "we *will* reap." But till then we have to live by faith. So, friends, the harvest is coming. But first we have to sow. All our days as pilgrims here in this world are the days of sowing. It's hard; it gets discouraging. But also remember: How we sow *now* is intimately connected to how we will reap *then*; for "whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (v7). The reaping *then* is divinely intertwined to our sowing *now*. And these are the only days we *get* to sow. These are the days to live for Christ; these are the days to pour out our lives, these are the days of sowing. Let's sow like we believe in the coming harvest. . .

<sup>62</sup> Insight from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>63</sup> Think back to John 11 and the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. One of the things that story teaches us is that *honest prayers* are better than *right theology*. Martha rattled off right answers about Jesus; but Mary wrestled and wept. And it was Mary's wrestling and weeping that prevailed, because *being honest with Jesus* is better than a *right theology about Jesus*.

<sup>64</sup> Abraham believed, but even his faith was the fruit of God's electing grace. Scripture teaches that even faith and repentance are *gifts* that God must give us (Acts 5:31; 11:18; Ephesians 2:8-9). Faith isn't something we can produce—it's a gift that God must give—and that He *does* give to all who call upon Him. Alec Motyer puts it this way: "In Genesis 15:6 we read of Abram that 'he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness' . . . Here is the essence of justification by faith. But notice what God says to him in verse 7: 'I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.' 'Now Abraham,' says God, 'please don't think that by believing you have climbed into a position by your own merits or deservings. Let me take your story back to where it began. I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees.'" (See his article, *Covenant and Promise*). Isn't this so often our experience as believers! There's a wonderful example of this in the Gospels, in John 1:43-45. Verse 43 tells us that *Jesus found Philip*. But that's not how Philip saw it, because he goes and tells Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote. . ." Philip thought he was the one who found Jesus. But later, Jesus would gently correct his thinking: "You did not chose Me, but I chose you. . ." (John 15:16).

A) *What is this oath?* We referred to this passage in the first Lesson, when we were defining what a covenant was. And there we saw that what God is doing here is taking a self-maledictory oath upon himself. God is saying, in effect: *May I become just like these animals if I do not make good on My promise to you.* We know this because of a similar passage in Jeremiah 34:13-22. The Babylonians come up to attack Israel, and the people are terrified and so they make promises to God and engage in this same covenant ceremony. They slaughter animals and walk between the pieces and tell God they'll get rid of their Hebrew slaves. But when the Babylonians go away, they go back on their word; they take their Hebrew slaves back. And Jeremiah comes to them and tells them that they are going to become just like the animals they had slaughtered and passed between the pieces. Why? Because when they took the oath, they were saying: "May I become like these animals if I break my promise." And they *did* break their promise; so God is saying: "Alright, I will deal with you just as you said."<sup>65</sup>

B) *Who takes this oath?* And so notice what is happening here in Genesis 15. It's *not* Abram that is making a covenant with God. It's *not* Abram who is passing between the pieces of the slaughtered animals and taking upon himself the self-maledictory oath to keep God's covenant. Abraham doesn't even walk through the pieces at all—in fact—it seems he had actually fallen asleep (v12). *God* is the One who passes between the pieces, in the form of "a smoking oven and a flaming torch." *God* is the One who takes upon himself the self-maledictory oath: "May I become like these animals if I do not make good on My promise." It's amazing what is happening here. God puts His own name on the line as He swears a solemn oath to Abram. And the outcome is so certain that, for the first time, the promise God had made to Abram is put in the *past* tense. We read in Genesis 15:18, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants *I have given* this land. . .'"<sup>66</sup>

C) *How to understand this oath?* One question might arise here: Didn't God already promise to give the land to Abram and his seed? Why the need for this formal ceremony? It might help to give an illustration, though it's from from a perfect one: Think of a father, who had acquired at some point in his life a very special car; and this father had promised his son many times over that one day he would give the car to him. Well, it's one thing for the father to make that promise, but it's another thing for him to actually deed over that car. To legally deed over the car to his son, there's a process that must take place. So, imagine that the father comes to his son one day and says: "Today, I'm deeding the car over to you." He signs the back of the title; he submits the ownership documents; he fills out the application forms and pays the fees. And after that, the ownership of the car transfers in such a way that *it now belongs legally* to his son. At that point, the father could no longer legally take the car back as his own—even if he wanted to. This is what God is doing here for Abram in Genesis 15. He had been making promises to him, *but now it's as though He's actually "putting it in writing."* Here in this passage, it's as though the Lord is saying: "Abram, while you were sleeping, I went ahead and officially deeded over the land to you. I put it in writing. It's a done deal now. It's yours."<sup>67</sup>

It's the same for us in Christ. God has given us promises, He's put them in writing, and He will never go back on them. The reason He will continue to lead and guide us, and the reason He'll never cast us away, and the reason He'll do a thousand other things He's promised to do, is that He has bound himself by solemn oath to fulfill His promises to us. His own name is on the line.<sup>68</sup> As a believer,

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<sup>65</sup> "By dividing the animals and passing between the pieces, participants in a covenant pledged themselves to life and death. These actions established an oath of self-malediction. If they should break the commitment involved in the covenant, they were asking that their own bodies be torn in pieces just as the animals had been divided ceremonially." (Robertson, p130).

<sup>66</sup> As Alec Motyer explains: "To pass between the severed pieces was the taking of a very vivid and terrible oath: 'So may it be done to me if this oath is broken.' God alone passes between these severed pieces. Not only does Abraham not pass, but he is disallowed from passing. God takes upon himself the total obligation of the covenant." (*Covenant and Promise*). And O Palmer Robertson writes: "Abraham does not pass between the divided pieces representing the covenantal curse of self-malediction. . . Only God himself passes between the pieces. By this action, God promises. The Lord assumes to himself the full responsibility for seeing that every promise of the covenant shall be realized." (*Christ of the Covenants*, p145).

<sup>67</sup> For more, see O Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, pp127-131, 145-146. In short, he says: "God the Creator binds himself to man the creature by a solemn blood-oath. The Almighty chooses to commit himself to the fulfillment of promises spoken to Abraham. By this divine commitment, Abraham's doubts are to be expelled. God has solemnly promised, and has sealed that promised with a self-maledictory oath. The realization of the divine word is assured." (p131).

<sup>68</sup> We see this truth played out throughout Scripture. One example is 1 Samuel 12: "Do not fear. You have committed all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart. . . For the Lord will not abandon His people on account of His great name. . ." (1 Samuel 12:19-22). Here Samuel tells God's people that the Lord would

you will fall again and again. But God will never cast you away. You are secure in your Savior. The Lord has put His promises to you in writing, and He has sealed them with the blood of His own Son.

## 6. The MARK of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about how we can know our faith is real*

Now, this doesn't mean that God never gave Abraham commands to obey. God requires Abraham's obedience. He tells him Genesis 17:1, "Walk before Me, and be blameless."<sup>69</sup> The call to Christ is the call to follow a new Lord and submit to His ways. So yes, there are commands in the Covenant of Grace. But as we've shown, the commands that God gave to Abraham were never conditions.<sup>70</sup> The promises God made to him were never conditional on his obedience. So, does God call us to a life of obedience? Absolutely. But is God's blessing and favor contingent on our obedience? No way. We obey—not to obtain God's blessing—but because we've already obtained it in Christ. One question remains though: If all this is true, how are we to understand James 2:14-26? Here we read:

<sup>14</sup>What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? <sup>17</sup>Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. <sup>18</sup>But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' <sup>19</sup>You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. <sup>20</sup>But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? <sup>21</sup>Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup>You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup>and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup>You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. <sup>25</sup>In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? <sup>26</sup>For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:14-26).

What do we make of this passage? At first glance, it seems to blatantly contradict everything else the Scriptures say about the gospel and salvation. It's baffling to us. What in the world is James saying?

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never abandon them. But he also tells us *why* God would never abandon them: "on account of His great name." God had bound himself by oath to fulfill the covenant promises He had made to Abraham and his descendants—and His own name was on the line in keeping His Word. See also Exodus 32:11-14 and Ezekiel 20 for wonderful examples of the same truth.

<sup>69</sup> For other examples of Abraham being bound to God's commands, see Genesis 12:1-3; 18:19; 22:1-2; 26:5.

<sup>70</sup> Some make passages such as Genesis 17:1-2 into a condition; but *commands* are not the same as *conditions*. If a father tells his son, "If you are diligent to make your bed every morning and tidy up your room every evening, then I will continue to be your father," that is a condition. But if the father tells his son, "Son, I am your father. I love you and I'll always be your father. Now then, be diligent to make your bed every morning and tidy up your room every evening," that is a command, not a condition. The language of Genesis 17 is the language of command, not condition. The literal Hebrew wording is not, "Do this so that I", but rather, "Do this, and I. . ." Genesis 26:3 contains the same Hebrew construction (a command followed by a promise and linked with the Hebrew "and I will"). Here God tells Isaac, "Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. . ." God gives Isaac here a definite command: "Sojourn in the land." But God isn't saying, "Isaac, if you sojourn in this land, then (and only then) will I fulfill the promises I have made to you;" rather, God is saying, "Isaac, sojourn in this land, and I will bless you, because that's what I've promised on oath to do." And this is how we must interpret passages such as Genesis 17:1-2 (cf. 17:19; 24:44,46; 48:9 with the same Hebrew construction, "and I will;" and Genesis 35:11-12 with the same structure of 1) declaration of God's character; 2) command; 3) promises to Jacob, with no conditions). Not, "If, then" but "Do, and." A command, but not a condition (Genesis 26:5 is another matter, where Abraham's active obedience typifies the active obedience of Christ—the basis through which blessing would come to the nations). This is how Bavinck interprets Genesis 17:1-2: "The bilateral dimensions of God's covenant—the obligations on those with whom it is made—are never conditions for entering the covenant, but understood as the rules of conduct for those who by grace had been incorporated into it (Gen.17:1-2; Exod.19:5-6,8; 24:3,7; Lev.26:14ff; Deut.5:29; 27:10ff; 28:1ff; 30:1ff; etc)." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, p395). Joel Beeke likewise notes: "true saving faith necessarily yields willing and continual obedience. Good works [however]. . .do not constitute the ground of justification, nor are they instruments by which sinners are justified. . .Because Abraham had true faith, he was commanded to walk before God and be perfect, and all true believers from Abraham onward would reflect 'their father Abraham,' both in their faith and in the obedience of faith." (*A Puritan Theology, ch.16*). Alec Motyer warns us at this point: "Genesis 17:1-2 needs to be guarded from misunderstanding as it might be taken to mean, 'If you walk before me and be blameless, then I will make my covenant with you.' This would make the covenant appear as a divine response to Abram's commitment, even a reward for the perfection of his 'walk.' This cannot be so because the covenant between God and Abraham had already been formally inaugurated many years before (Gen. 15:18). Also, the wording in Genesis 17:2 does not express the idea of inauguration but rather confirmation. A literal translation would be, 'and I will place my covenant,' an expression which signifies the covenant coming into active operation as the stated relationship between its maker and its recipient. Abraham's life of fellowship with the Lord was not the pre-condition of the covenant but rather the response. . . From beginning to end, God's covenant relationship with his people is based on his grace and not their merits." (*Exodus*, p19).

Well, in this passage, James is talking about *the marks of true saving faith*. His purpose here isn't to tell us how to be saved—but to tell us how we can know if we really have been saved. The Scriptures warn us that not all who profess to know and love Christ have truly embraced Him by faith. James himself used to be one of them! He was the brother of Jesus; yet Scripture tells us that James wasn't a true believer until Jesus appeared to him after His resurrection (John 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 15:7). So, James has a special place in his heart for professing Christians who have never truly been born again. And his message is this: Don't think you're really a believer *just because you claim to be*.

One thing that helps us see this is recognizing the difference in the language between James and Paul. Paul often says *the same things*, but he uses *different words*. For example, when Paul talks about the evidence of true saving faith, he tends to use the word *fruit* rather than *works*. James is here using the word *works* where Paul uses the word *fruit*. They're using different words—but they're talking about the same thing: If your life hasn't been radically changed by the gospel, then you better check the reality of your profession. Because when God saves a man, He changes him completely.<sup>71</sup>

This is why, at the beginning of the passage, in *VERSE 14*, James doesn't ask what use it is if a man has faith but has no works—but rather—what use is it if a man *says* he has faith but has no works. It's a *profession* of faith that James is talking about. James is speaking of a person who *professes faith* in Christ, but whose life is left completely unchanged. And he's saying that *that kind of faith* will never save anyone.<sup>72</sup> Then in *VERSE 18*, James is saying that true faith *shows itself* through works: “I will show you my faith by my works.” He's telling us that true saving faith demonstrates itself through works. The fruit reveals the root; real apple trees always bear apples.<sup>73</sup> Then, in *VERSES 22 and 24*, James says that Abraham's faith was *something you could outwardly see*. In these verses he uses the Greek word *blepo*, “you see,” which, out of the 108 times it is used in the New Testament, always refers to physical sight (rather than our colloquial English expression). He's talking about something you can physically see. Faith is something you should be able to see as you look at someone's life.

So when James says that Abraham was *justified by works*, he's not saying our works justify us before God—he's saying our works justify the reality of our faith.<sup>74</sup> He's using it the same way that Jesus did in Luke 7:35: “wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” The word here is the same word used in James. What's Jesus saying? He's saying that true wisdom is proven to be wisdom through the fruit it bears. And this is exactly what James is saying. A profession of true saving faith is proven by a life that has been changed. Fruit proves the reality of your profession. As one put it “The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> They also, at times, use *the same words*, but use them *in different ways*. This is especially true “justify”, as we'll see below.

<sup>72</sup> “Abraham was not justified by a vain show of faith, by a workless faith, which James so much condemns; but by a true faith that justifies itself by works. . . [his] intent in this chapter is, not to show *how* or wherewith we are justified, or whether faith, or works, or both, justify us; but rather to show *what manner of faith* that is whereby we must be justified; viz, a lively working fruit-bearing faith. . . the plain scope of James is, to prove, that this faith which brings not forth true fruits, true good works, is a vain dead useless faith, as to the point of justifying or saving anyone” (Roberts, pp623-24). “James does not say 'though a man has faith' but 'though a man say...' James offers something of a definition of the faith which he is examining. It is a mere matter of claim, a formally correct statement, but its doctrinal credibility does not issue in a new direction of life.” (Motyer, p108).

<sup>73</sup> “James challenged anyone who claimed to have faith to demonstrate it, to make it visible. The only visible evidence available to human eyes is that of the deeds of obedience. Although God can read the hearts of individuals, humanity's only view of the heart condition is the sight of outward fruit.” (From the *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* on James 2:18).

<sup>74</sup> “James used the word 'justified' to refer to the proof, or vindication, of Abraham's faith that took place many years later (Gen. 22:12). In James, the phrases 'considered righteous' (here) and 'is justified' (v24) do not refer to reconciliation to God but to demonstration of the truth of a prior claim. Jesus used the same verb (*dikaioo*) in this way in Luke 7:35, when he declared, 'Wisdom is proved right by all her children' (IE, wisdom is shown to be genuine wisdom by its results). Just as true wisdom is demonstrated by its fruit, Abraham's claim to faith was justified (IE, demonstrated by his outward obedience.” (*Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*). Roberts says: “And 'by works was faith perfected'; that is, not *essentially or causally*, as any cause or concause (sic) cooperating with his faith in the point of his justification; for Abraham's faith was perfect, and had done many excellent exploits long before, yea had justified Abraham perfectly before God many years before his offering up of Isaac; but *evidentially or declaratively*, this act perfectly evidenced before the Lord the truth of his faith. . . So that when James said, 'Abraham was justified by works when he had offered up Isaac', his meaning was, that he was justified by works only *a posteriori*, as *effects and fruits* of faith and justification; but by faith, *a priori, causally*, which produced such works, and was *evidentially and experimentally* perfected of them.” (p625-26). And again: “By his faith, his *person* was justified, and he [was] accounted a righteous person; by his works, his *faith* was justified, to be a true sincere living and saving faith.” (p470).

<sup>75</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. And Motyer quotes A. Barnes: “There is as much necessity that faith and works

To summarize: Paul tells us *how we're justified*; James shows us *what kind of faith it is that justifies*. Paul says *faith alone justifies*; James tells us that *justifying faith is never alone* but always will produce fruit. Paul's focus is that *our faith justifies us*; James' focus is that *our works justify our faith*.<sup>76</sup>

COMPARING THE DIFFERENT EMPHASIS OF PAUL AND JAMES

PAUL'S FOCUS	How we're justified	Justification is by faith apart from works	Faith justifies us
JAMES' FOCUS	What kind of faith justifies	Justifying faith will always produce works	Works justify our faith

In short, James is warning us that intellectual orthodoxy with no life-change is not true saving faith. Having good theology can't save you. Demons actually have great theology (verse 19), but they will perish forever. True saving faith proves itself through our works. When someone professes faith in Christ, how do you know if he's really saved? You watch his life over the next 5, 10, 25 years, and you ask, has this person been changed? Does his life back up his profession? We're not talking about perfection. But does his life show forth the reality of a true and living faith in Christ? *How about you?* Can those who know you best say: that guy is *far* from perfect—but I see Jesus in him.<sup>77</sup>

7. The SIGN of the Covenant of Grace: *We learn about the badge God has given to His people*

Let's turn now to Genesis 17. This is our last section, and we're going to spend a lot of time here, because there's so much in this chapter that's important for us to understand. So let's jump right in.

A) *The CONTEXT of the Passage:* We're told in the first verse of Genesis 17 that Abram is now 99 years old, which means that it had been nearly a full 25 years since he left Haran for the land of Canaan. We're also told in the last verse of Genesis 16 that 13 years had passed between Chapter 16 and Chapter 17. What happened in Genesis 16? Abram had listened to his wife Sarah to take her maid Hagar as another wife. God had promised to make Abram into a great nation, but over 10 years later, he still had no children, and he wasn't getting any younger. So at the suggestion of his wife, Abram tries to force God's timing by taking things into his own hands. He takes Hagar as another wife and she bears Ishmael to him. And from that point on, there's nothing but trouble. When Hagar conceives, she looks down on Sarah; then Sarah retaliates by getting violent with Hagar. Scripture doesn't tell us anything else about those 13 years, but judging from Sarah's words later in 21:9-10, it seems that the family unrest continues. What does this teach us? *Unbelief only leaves us empty.* Abram had given into unbelief; he had failed to trust in the Lord; and his sin had brought real consequences not just to himself, but to his whole family. *But that wasn't the end of the story.* . .

In Genesis 17, God comes once again to Abram to comfort and revive him. And the way God does this is by reminding him of two things: His *character* and His *covenant*. God reminds Abram both of *who He is* and of *what He has promised*. So, God says, "I am God Almighty. . ." (v1). This is His *character*; this is who God is. He is God *Almighty*; the Living God who does the impossible (like cause a 100 year old man and his 90 year old wife to bear children). He is the Sovereign King who rules the earth. God also reminds Abram of His *covenant*: ". . . My covenant is with you" (v4). God is confirming the covenant He had made with Abram so long ago. In fact, God is here basically

should be united to constitute true religion, as there is that body and soul should be united to constitute a living man." (p110).  
<sup>76</sup> Roberts says: "Paul speaks of a true lively faith as justifying; James excludes the false dead workless faith from justifying; Paul shows whereby we are justified, viz, by faith; James shows what manner of faith it must be, viz, a lively working faith, whereby we are justified; Paul proves that we are justified by faith, without works as causes of justification; James proves that we are justified by works also as effects and consequents upon justification, and not by faith only; Paul maintains that faith alone justifies; James maintains that justifying faith is not alone in the justified person, but produces good works; Paul intends our justification *a priori, casually, and instrumentally*, by faith without works; James intends our justification *a posteriori, declaratively and demonstratively* by works the fruits of faith; Paul evinces that faith alone justifies our persons, but James evidences that works are requisite to justify our faith. So that the doctrine of Paul and James is [unified] most harmoniously agreeing one with the other, even wherein they seem most of all to disagree." (pp626-27). Vos says: "[James'] argument is aimed against libertines who used the teaching of grace of the gospel as a cloak for their licentiousness. . . In his Letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, Paul naturally had to do with entirely different opponents—namely, with Pharisaic proponents of salvation by works, who replaced faith with works. That is why his polemic turned out differently. His watchword. . . [is] *sola fide*, 'by faith only.' The watchword of James is *sed non fide solitario*, 'but not by a faith that is solitary, standing alone.' The one watchword does not exclude the other." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 4, p168). See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.17.11-12.  
<sup>77</sup> Most of this section was based on and gratefully gleaned from a sermon on James 2:14-26 by Phil Smuland.

reiterating the same covenant promises He had made to Abram back in Genesis 12.<sup>78</sup> Now, why would God do that? Why would God tell Abraham in Genesis 17 the same stuff He already told him back in Genesis 12? Because 25 years had passed since Genesis 12. And if you've been a believer for 25 years, you have a much more realistic view of yourself than when God first saved you. If you've been a believer for 25 years, you've been confronted with the depths of your weaknesses, your failures, your sin. And so, God coming to Abram in Genesis 17 to reiterate the same promises He had made 25 years earlier is really the sweetest thing in the world. Because it means that 25 years of Abram's worst sin and failure couldn't mess up the promises God had made to him. Abram had failed God, but God would never fail him. God's promises after 25 years were just as true as ever.

*B) The NATURE, IMPORTANCE and PURPOSE of Covenant Signs:* After the promises of verses 1-8, the Lord gives to Abraham circumcision as the sign of His covenant with him. We've talked about covenant signs before: The *rainbow* was the covenant sign given to Noah; *circumcision* is the covenant sign given here to Abraham; *the Sabbath* would be the covenant sign given to Israel later through Moses. And, as we mentioned before, "covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people."<sup>79</sup> *A covenant sign was a tangible picture of God's eternal promises to His people.*

We've seen that *covenant signs are the foundation for our understanding of the sacraments* (baptism and the Lord's Supper). What this means is that we need to have a right understanding of covenant signs if we want to have a right understanding of the sacraments. And this is so important, because so much false teaching has resulted from a lack of understanding of covenant signs and how they relate to the covenant. This is why, for instance, there are denominations that teach that you can't be saved unless you're baptized.<sup>80</sup> It's because they have failed to understand the nature of covenant signs.

In particular, *covenant signs are given for the purpose of assuring God's people of His promises.* That's what they're for. Covenant signs were never given as some kind of ritual to save unbelievers. Covenant signs aren't given to unbelievers at all—they're given to those who already do believe. God was already in a relationship with Abraham long before Genesis 17. God didn't give Abraham circumcision to save him—Abraham had been walking with God for 25 years! No, it was in order to encourage and strengthen him in God's promises. And to do that, God gives Abraham a very tangible reminder of what He had promised. God marks Abraham's body with the covenant sign of circumcision, so that he would never forget the reality of the promises that God had made to him.<sup>81</sup>

*A question might arise here:* Why did Abraham need this kind of tangible sign, and why is it that we need tangible pictures like baptism and the Lord's Supper to strengthen our faith? Shouldn't God's Word be enough? Why can't we just preach? The short answer is that if God has given us covenant signs (or sacraments) and commanded us to take part in them, then we need them—whether we think we do or not. The truth is, we are a weak people who need to be reminded of God's promises. And so, we are strengthened when we hold the bread with our hands, and smell the wine, and taste them both; to remember that just as real as this bread and wine, are the promises God has made to us.<sup>82</sup>

*C) The MEANING of Circumcision:* So, how are we to understand the covenant sign of circumcision? 1) Circumcision was NOT an ETHNIC sign: it was not a sign to mark Jewish ethnicity (the physical offspring of Abraham). We know this, first of all, because Abraham is commanded not only to circumcise his children, but to circumcise all the household servants that lived with him, who were not of his offspring, but foreigners (vv12-13). If Abraham is here commanded to circumcise those who are ethnically non-Jewish, then circumcision cannot be an *ethnic* sign.<sup>83</sup> 2) Circumcision

<sup>78</sup> There are minor differences: For instance, in 12:2, God promises to make him a great nation, whereas in 17:4-5 the Lord expands on this, promising to make Abram a multitude of nations. And, Chapter 12 focuses on blessing whereas Chapter 17 focuses on multiplication and fruitfulness. But though there are minor differences, the main thrust of the content is the same.

<sup>79</sup> Alec Motyer, *Covenant and Promise*.

<sup>80</sup> IE, the Church of Christ.

<sup>81</sup> Alec Motyer puts it this way: "Every time Abraham therefore observed the mark of circumcision in his own body, he would declare, 'I am the man to whom God has made promises.'" (*Covenant and Promise*). In light of God's command to Abram in verse 1, Motyer also notes: "Abraham cannot look at the mark of circumcision and glory in the promises without at the same time being reminded over and over again in his commitment to God — 'Walk before me and be thou perfect.'"

<sup>82</sup> Much of this section was gleaned from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>83</sup> We could also think of Genesis 34, where Jacob's sons tell the Hivites that they must be circumcised in order to marry into



was also NOT a NATIONAL sign: Some people argue that circumcision in the Old Testament was merely a mark to identify the members of the nation of Israel.<sup>84</sup> They would grant that Gentiles were indeed, at times, circumcised just as the Jews were (as in the case of Abraham's servants), but they maintain it was a badge of *national* allegiance, not *spiritual* allegiance. According to them, it was given, not to mark *the people of God*, but the members of *the nation of Israel*. In other words, they say that circumcision had no *spiritual* significance—it was merely a sign of *national* identity. Scripture teaches us, however, that circumcision was never given as a *national* sign; but as a *spiritual* one.<sup>85</sup>

1) *Circumcision was a spiritual SIGN because the covenant was a spiritual COVENANT.* The best way to properly understand the *sign* of God's covenant with Abraham is to understand the *nature* of God's covenant with Abraham. After all, the whole point of a *sign* is to point us to *the reality* that it represents. The whole purpose of a wedding ring—the sign of the marriage covenant—is to point us back to the marriage covenant that it represents. In the same way, the best way to understand the *covenant sign* of circumcision is to understand the *actual covenant* that God is making with Abraham. And Genesis 17:7 tells us one thing in particular that's absolutely vital in understanding this covenant. Here in verse 7, God says to Abraham: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your descendants after you.*” What does this tell us? The covenant God is making with Abraham is *about salvation in the fullest sense*. We've seen this over and over and we see it again here.<sup>86</sup> God says to Abraham: “*I will . . . be God to you and to your descendants after you.*” This is the very heart of God's covenant with Abraham. It's about God owning a people for himself in the fullest sense—it's about salvation; it's a thoroughly *spiritual* covenant. And circumcision is given as *the sign of that covenant*. As God tells Abraham in Genesis 17:11: “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be *the sign of the covenant* between Me and you.” If God's *covenant* with Abraham is about salvation, then *the sign of that covenant* has to be about salvation.<sup>87</sup> Again, that's the whole point of covenant signs: the sign is given as a picture of what's being promised; the whole purpose of the sign is point to what's being signified.<sup>88</sup> So, if God's *covenant* with Abraham is about salvation, then *the sign of that covenant* must also be about salvation (rather than national identity).<sup>89</sup>

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the family. Another example is in Esther 8:17, where for fear of the Jews, many among the peoples of the land “became Jews,” which must be speaking of a religious change rather than an ethnic change, for no one can change their ethnicity, but we can change our religious allegiance. Exodus 12:43-49 is also a very important passage we'll deal with more in depth later.

<sup>84</sup> Many Baptists make this argument. “Baptists are intent on making this dispensation [the Old Testament] terminate in what is external. What God established with Israel was a national covenant, nothing more. This national covenant had national covenantal seals, a national continuation in the line of natural propagation. . . The significance of circumcision accords with all that. But in the New Testament, it has become completely different. Now, what is external and national has ceased to be valid. Something spiritual and universal has come in its place. . . This is the Baptist position.” (Vos, Volume 5, pp161-62).

<sup>85</sup> I should warn you that we're about to launch into controversial waters. This section gives the Scriptural foundation for the historical Presbyterian understanding of covenant children and how they relate to the church, and specifically the practice of infant baptism. I've done my best to be neither too laborious on the one hand nor too brief on the other as I explain these things from the Scriptures, but my best is very imperfect. I deeply respect my Reformed Baptist brothers and want to affirm that though we have different convictions from the Scriptures on this particular issue—and though those Scriptural convictions are important—still, at the end of the day, the far more important issue at stake is not what we believe about this particular issue—but whether or not we are enthralled with Christ, and whether or not that is affecting everything about how we live.

<sup>86</sup> See especially Section 3 above, “The Promises of the Covenant of Grace,” which deals with this at length.

<sup>87</sup> This is all the more so in light of the fact that the sign of God's covenant with Abraham is so intimately bound together with the covenant, that God actually calls circumcision the covenant itself (rather than the sign of the covenant) in Genesis 17:9-10. This need not alarm us, as if the sacraments have saving power. Ball explains, “Sacramental phrases, wherein the name of the thing signified is given to the sign, are ancient and familiar; as circumcision is called the covenant, and the rock Christ.” (p91).

<sup>88</sup> We learned this with Noah in Genesis 9. God's covenant promise to Noah and all those who came out of the ark with him, was that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood. That was *the essence of the covenant*. And the rainbow was given as a sign (a picture) and a seal (a pledge) *of that promise* to never again cut off all flesh with the waters of the flood.

<sup>89</sup> We could add further from this same passage that the covenant God made with Abraham is “an everlasting covenant” (v7). So then: it's not a temporary (national) arrangement that's going to be replaced later in the New Testament. The covenant with Abraham won't be replaced at all. That's why in Romans 11:17-24, Paul refers to New Testament Gentile believers as being branches that have been ingrafted into the olive tree of Abraham. There's not two trees—an Old Testament “national” tree and a New Testament “spiritual” tree—there's just one tree. And New Testament believers have been ingrafted into *that same* tree. Both these truths—that God's covenant with Abraham is about salvation and that it is everlasting—are confirmed in Acts 2:39: “For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” Now, Acts 2:39 is not a proof-text for infant baptism *in and of itself*. But at the very least, it shows us exactly the two truths mentioned above: 1) God's covenant with Abraham is *about salvation*: in that the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit is inseparably linked to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:7. And, 2) God's covenant

2) *Circumcision was a spiritual SIGN because Scripture explicitly TELLS US so.* Scripture actually tells us quite plainly that circumcision was a sign—not of *national* identity—but of *spiritual* identity; in two ways: **FIRST**, Scripture tells us that circumcision signified *JUSTIFICATION by faith*. Outward circumcision was given as a sign of inward saving faith. We see this in Romans 4:11, where we read: “and [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised. . .” This passage is incredibly significant. Paul is here explicitly telling us what circumcision was all about: Circumcision was given as the sign, or mark, or badge of *Abraham’s faith*. This passage of Scripture couldn’t be more clear: Abraham’s circumcision was not a sign of national identity; rather, it was one of spiritual identity. It was given to Abraham as a sign and seal of his *justification by faith*.<sup>90</sup> **SECONDLY**, Scripture teaches us that circumcision was given to signify *REGENERATION by the Spirit*. Outward circumcision was given in order to point to the inward regeneration—the new birth—that takes place when God circumcises a man’s heart. God would later warn His people through the prophet Jeremiah: “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart” (Jeremiah 4:4).<sup>91</sup> *Outwardly* God’s people were circumcised, but many of them in Jeremiah’s day lacked *the reality* of what the sign pointed to—the *circumcision of the heart*.<sup>92</sup>

So, according to Scripture, circumcision *wasn’t* a sign of ethnic identity or a sign of national identity—it was a sign of *spiritual identity*. It was a sign of *salvation*. And it was given to Abraham to mark him as one who belonged wholly to God. In circumcision, God’s *covenant sign* is given to mark God’s *covenant man* as an heir of God’s *covenant promises*. That’s what circumcision is all about. Further, the sign of circumcision wasn’t just given to mark Abraham as a believer. From this point onward, it would be the outward sign that would mark *all* the Old Testament people of God.

Now, what is the sign that marks God’s people now? It’s *baptism*. Baptism functions now for us in exactly the same way that circumcision functioned for God’s people in the Old Testament: *Circumcision* was the outward sign of justification by faith in the Old Testament; *baptism* is the outward sign of justification by faith now.<sup>93</sup> *Circumcision* symbolized the new birth (regeneration) in the Old Testament; *baptism* symbolizes the new birth now.<sup>94</sup> *Circumcision* was the sign given to mark God’s people in the Old Testament; *baptism* is the sign given to mark God’s people now. This is why Paul links circumcision and baptism together in Colossians 2:11-12, when he says, “in [Christ] you [New Testament believers] were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism. . .” Paul is telling us that baptism functions now in exactly the same way that circumcision functioned then: Baptism has replaced circumcision as the outward sign of God’s covenant people.<sup>95</sup>

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with Abraham is *everlasting*; the promise God had made to Abraham was the same promise now being declared at Pentecost.

<sup>90</sup> “Paul tells us expressly that circumcision was ‘a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith’ (Rom.4:11).” (Vos, V5, p114).

<sup>91</sup> See also Jeremiah 9:26; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Colossians 1:11 and Romans 2:25-29.

<sup>92</sup> Another reason that circumcision can’t be a national sign is the fact that the nation of Israel didn’t actually even begin to exist until the time of Moses. Vos draws this out when he says: “[Circumcision] was instituted when God formally founded His covenant of grace with Abraham. That was a long time before the covenant people were organized as a theocratic state at Sinai. According to the Baptist view being contested here, circumcision should have come at Sinai, and not already with Abraham. But now, it does not come from Moses but from the patriarchs, as the Lord says (John 7:22).” (Volume 5, p163).

<sup>93</sup> See Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 8:12-13; 22:16; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:20-22 with Romans 4:11.

<sup>94</sup> See Romans 6:1-7; Colossians 2:11-12; Titus 3:5 with Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26.

<sup>95</sup> Calvin makes this comment on Colossians 2:11-12: “What do these words mean, except that the fulfillment and truth of baptism are also the truth and fulfillment of circumcision, since they signify one and the same thing? For [Paul] is striving to demonstrate that baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews.” (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.11). As Bavinck says: “According to Colossians 2:11-12 this circumcision was replaced by baptism. . .Through the death of Christ, which was a complete putting off of sin and victory over sin and hence fully realized the idea of circumcision, that circumcision has been rendered obsolete and came to its antitypical fulfillment in baptism. Baptism, therefore, is more than circumcision, not in essence but in degree. Circumcision pointed forward to the death of Christ; baptism points back to it.” (V4, pp526-27). We could also note here that baptism and circumcision don’t just function as covenant signs, but as pictures of the truths contained in the covenant. And, in fact, baptism and circumcision picture the same truths. The water of baptism pictures 1) our need for cleansing; 2) God’s provision of that cleansing in the atoning blood that washes away all our sins; 3) and the new heart that is given in the washing of regeneration by the Spirit. And circumcision pictures the same three truths: 1) *ruin* by the fall; 2) *redemption* in Christ; and 3) *regeneration* by the Spirit. **FIRST**, *ruin by the fall*: the corrupt and depraved condition into which we were born is often likened in Scripture to the foreskin of the heart—something we’re born with and yet something that must be cut off if we are to live eternally (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26). **SECOND**, *redemption in Christ*: the Messiah, who would accomplish redemption for His people (Genesis 3:15), would come forth through Abraham’s

HOW NEW TESTAMENT BAPTISM SIGNIFIES THE SAME THINGS AS OLD TESTAMENT CIRCUMCISION

THE INWARD REALITY THAT HAPPENED TO YOU	THE OUTWARD SIGN THAT MARKED YOU	
	IN THE OLD TESTAMENT	IN THE NEW TESTAMENT
Justification by Faith	CIRCUMCISION	BAPTISM
Regeneration by the Spirit		
Becoming a member of God's People		

*D) The RECIPIENTS of Circumcision:* So, again, *circumcision* was given in order to mark the community of believers in the Old Testament in the same way that *baptism* has been given to mark the community of believers now in the New Testament. The two signs point to the same reality.

Now, in the Old Testament, circumcision was to be given to two groups of people in particular: *First*, to **ADULT CONVERTS**: non-Jewish, Gentile outsiders who forsake their pagan heritage to embrace the Living God and join themselves to His people. This is how it was for Abraham; God called him as *an adult*. And we see this happen throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. We read of Gentiles forsaking their pagan heritage to take refuge in the Lord and join themselves to the people of God.<sup>96</sup> Now, if this foreigner was a male, he was to be circumcised to signify his faith in the Lord and his entrance into the covenant community.<sup>97</sup> So, for *adult converts* like Abraham, circumcision marked spiritual realities that had *already taken place*. Romans 4:11 tells us that circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign (*a picture*) and a seal (*a pledge*) of the faith he already had while uncircumcised.

This is why we baptize adult converts only *after* they profess faith in Christ. We baptize them to signify what God has done—that God has called this person to himself—that God has *washed away* all their sins in the blood of Jesus and given them *a new heart* that loves Him and wants to follow Him.

But this sign was *also* to be applied to **COVENANT CHILDREN**: And this is what Genesis 17:9-14 focuses on. God is telling Abraham to apply that same sign—the sign that was only given to him *after* he had believed—he was to apply that same sign *to every male in his household*. In Genesis 17:10, the Lord says to Abraham, “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: *every male among you* shall be circumcised. . .” This included both *sons* and *servants*—everyone who belonged to Abraham's household and lived under his authority (vv10-

loins (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; Galatians 3:13-14). Further, Christ would accomplish this redemption by being cut off from God's presence in order that we might be reconciled to God (Isaiah 53:8). **THIRD**, *regeneration by the Spirit*: if the foreskin of our hearts represents our natural corrupt and depraved condition, then to circumcise your heart was to have that natural corruption and depravity decisively cut off—it was to be born again (regeneration); this is something that God commanded of His people (Deuteronomy 10:16) and yet at the same time something only God could do for His people (Deuteronomy 30:6).

<sup>96</sup> We see this with *Rahab*, who confesses before the Israelite spies that, “the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11). We see it with *Ruth*, who tells her mother-in-law Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16; cf. 2:12). We see it with *Naaman*, who testifies to Elisha, “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel. . .your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord” (2 Kings 5:15,17). There were several Gentiles who joined themselves to David (such as Ittai the Gittite, the Cherethites and Pelethites, and some of David's mighty men, including Uriah the Hittite). Just a few examples among many.

<sup>97</sup> We can see this in Exodus 12:42-49, in the context of the Lord describing for Moses and Aaron the rightful partakers of the Passover Meal, from which we glean the following truths: 1) Passover was a spiritual feast celebrating God's work of redemption for His people (v42); 2) Partaking of the Passover was thus to be limited to the community of God's people—outsiders were forbidden from partaking (vv43,45,47); 3) However, outsiders who were circumcised could then partake of the Passover and were considered from then on to be equal members of God's people (vv48-49); 4) Thus, circumcision was the badge of membership in the covenant community—it bestowed free access to all the privileges enjoyed by members of the covenant community. Once you received the covenant *mark*, you were free to enjoy the covenant *meal*. Circumcision was necessary to celebrate the Passover in the Old Testament in the same way that baptism is necessary to celebrate the Lord's Supper now in the New Testament. If anyone objects that there is nothing in this passage that explicitly requires the faith of these Gentiles wanting to celebrate the Passover, we would refer to Ezekiel 44:7-9, wherein the Lord, speaking in particular of Gentiles, rebukes Israelite leaders for allowing foreigners both uncircumcised in flesh *and* uncircumcised in heart into the sanctuary. Thus, we see that the Gentiles who were to be given access to the Lord's sanctuary were not only to be circumcised in flesh—but *in heart*. Besides, Exodus 12:49 tells us that it was to be the same rule for Gentiles who joined God's people as it was for the Jews. So, if the Lord was so disturbed over the fact that many in Israel were outwardly circumcised but they lacked the true circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26, etc), how could that be okay for Gentiles?

13). And not only was Abraham to circumcise every male in his household, he was to do so from this point onward *when they were just 8 days old*: “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations. . .” (17:12).<sup>98</sup> So, in verses 23-27 we read of Abraham circumcising all of his servants, as well as his son Ishmael (who is 13 years old at this point). Later, after Isaac is born, we read in Genesis 21:4, “Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.” So, this is what is vital for us to understand: *the same sign of salvation that was given to Abraham only after he had already believed in the Lord, God then commands that same sign to be applied to his 8-day old children far before belief in the Lord is ever possible*. It was *adult-circumcision* for Abraham. But it was *infant-circumcision* for his children.<sup>99</sup>

*E) The IMPLICATIONS for Household Baptism:* And this is exactly why we baptize the children of believers as well as adult converts:<sup>100</sup> the covenant sign isn't just for believers—it's for their children. Just like circumcision—baptism isn't just for ingrafted foreigners—it's also for our covenant children:<sup>101</sup>

WHAT IS THE COVENANT SIGN		WHO RECEIVES THE COVENANT SIGN	WHEN THE COVENANT SIGN IS GIVEN
OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT		
CIRCUMCISION	BAPTISM	ADULT CONVERTS	Only after profession of faith in the Lord
		COVENANT CHILDREN	At infancy before faith in the Lord is possible

So, Abraham was to mark his infant children with the same covenant sign that he had received only *after* believing. But why? Well, *first of all*, he was to do so simply because God had commanded him to. Maybe Abraham would have had objections: “But Lord, this is the sign you gave to me only

<sup>98</sup> Why didn't the daughters also receive the covenant sign? “God could have instituted a sacrament which might have agreed to both sexes, but of his infinite wisdom, he made choice of that which could have being in the males only; but the female was accounted as circumcised in the male; and therefore faithful women were the daughters of Abraham (Luke 13:16), and the common promise, that God would be the God of Abraham and his seed, did pertain to each sex of his posterity.” (Ball, p90).

<sup>99</sup> It's important to note here that this same command—to circumcise the entire household—is not only given to Abraham or ethnic Jews, but also to adult Gentile converts. Goodwin notes: “And let me add this further observation, that in Abraham's family his servants that were Gentiles, if they had children, those children were circumcised [Genesis 17:12-13], as foregoing pledges and types that both we and our children, who are Gentiles and strangers, were engrafted into this covenant, it held forth this our privilege to come, that in Abraham the Gentiles' seed (as well as Abraham's own) should be blessed in him.” (*Works*, V9, p433). We see this same principle in the passage we noted in the above footnote (Exodus 12:42-49), where the Lord says in Exodus 12:48: “But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the Lord, *let all his males be circumcised*, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land.” He alone believed—but it was his whole household that was to be circumcised. When a Gentile outsider was converted, he was just as bound as the ethnic Jew to pass on the covenant sign of circumcision to all the males in his household. Incidentally, another thing we learn here is that even though all his males were circumcised, it was he alone who partook of the Passover; for it doesn't say, “then let *them* come. . .” but: “let *him* come. . .” It seems that even in the Old Testament, not everyone who was circumcised was given access to the Passover. There must be a personal profession of faith prior to partaking of the covenant meal.

<sup>100</sup> Not primarily because of Abraham's example—but because of *God's command*. God commanded Abraham to mark not only himself—but his infant sons—with the covenant sign. Further, the Lord told Abraham in Genesis 17:12, “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised *throughout your generations*. . .” In other words, the application of the covenant sign wasn't just a temporary arrangement—it was to be administered both to believers and their children as long as God's covenant itself was in effect (compare with 17:7). So, we ask: If the sign of salvation in the Old Testament was to be applied both to believers and to their children, then why should the sign of salvation in the New Testament be applied to believers but *not* to their children? If infants in the Old Testament could only be saved the same way we are now (IE through faith in Christ)—and yet God still commanded that they receive the sign of the covenant well before that faith was ever possible—then why should it be that *our* infants are denied the sign of the covenant (on the basis that faith isn't possible for them)?

<sup>101</sup> Calvin writes: “Why, in Abraham's case, does the sacrament follow faith, but in Isaac, his son, precede all understanding? Because it is fair that he who is a grown man is received into the fellowship of the covenant to which he had been till then a stranger should learn its conditions beforehand, but it is not the same with his infant son. . .The whole matter, unless I am mistaken, can be clearly disclosed in this brief statement. Those who embrace faith in Christ as grown men, since they were previously strangers to the covenant, are not to be given the badge of baptism unless they first have faith and repentance, which alone can give access to the society of the covenant. But those infants who derive their origin from Christians, as they have been born directly into the inheritance of the covenant, and are expected by God, are thus to be received into baptism.” (*Institutes 4.16.24*). Roberts says: “So great account God made of Abraham and his seed; that both he and his seed must be installed and initiated by circumcision. Yea every male child of theirs of eight days old must be circumcised. The infant babes must have this covenant badge, they being in covenant with their parents. This honor and favor God put upon Abraham's seed. And both his Jewish, and Christian seed, and with them their infants share therein. As Abraham's Jewish seed and their infants were to be circumcised, so Abraham's Christian seed and their infants are to be baptized.” (Roberts, p317).

after I had believed. Are you sure I should give this same sign to my infant sons? Shouldn't I wait for my sons to believe, just as I did, before I circumcise them?" Maybe Abraham didn't understand why God was commanding this; still, God had spoken; God had given the command; and Abraham's duty was simply to obey the voice of the Lord. *But there was also another reason* why Abraham was to mark his sons with the covenant sign. In Genesis 17:7, the Lord said to Abraham: "I will establish My covenant between Me and you *and your descendants after you* throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you *and to your descendants after you.*" What is God telling Abraham? He's telling Abraham that the *promises of the covenant* weren't just for him—they were for his children. And therefore, the *sign of the covenant* wasn't just for him, but also for his children. Scripture is teaching us that the Covenant of Grace extends not only to believers, but also to their children. Abraham was to mark his offspring with the covenant *sign* because God was extending to them His covenant *promises*. Now, this *doesn't* mean that all of Abraham's children (or ours) will be saved—we'll get to that.<sup>102</sup> But God is pledging here not just to redeem an individual—but an entire household—and not only an entire household, but an entire covenant line for generations to come.<sup>103</sup>

This is God's way; it's how He's commanded us to apply the sign of the covenant: For adult converts like Abraham, the *covenant reality*—faith in the Lord—must come first; and only then is the *covenant sign* to be applied. But for the children of believers, the Lord has commanded that the *covenant sign* be given first, far before the *covenant reality* of faith in the Lord is ever possible. For adult converts, then, the *reality* is to precede the *sign*; but for covenant children, the *sign* is to precede the *reality*.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> See Sections F (*A Vital Clarification*) and G (*The Mystery in the Covenant*) below.

<sup>103</sup> The promise wasn't just made to Abraham's children but to his descendants "throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant." Psalm 105:8 says: "He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations." It is confirmed to Isaac, then Jacob, then generations later to Israel (vv9-10). Romans 11:1-5 tells us that God's covenant with Abraham is still being upheld even today to a remnant among his physical descendants. Further, that this promise isn't limited only to ethnic Jews but extends also to believing Gentiles—those of the faith of Abraham—is evident from Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 7:9, "Know therefore that the Lord you God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments." Calvin says: "And in very deed it behoved the people always to come back to this saying: 'I am thy God and the God of thine offspring after thee.' And against unto this, 'I am the Lord which shows mercy to a thousand generations' as we shall see hereafter. Now, this was not said for that one time only, it must be accomplished nowadays also. Then let us consider that God having once plated [?] that warrant of our salvation, will have it go forward daily, so as we should know that he calls us to the possessing of His kingdom, and that in us He calls them that are to come after us; in so much that those children which come of Christians, are already chosen of God to be His stock and of His household, and God has taken them to himself already, even before they come out of their mothers womb." (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, p9). And again: "When God has once planted his word, He continues that grace, not only till the decease of those to whom He speaks, but also to their children and their offspring." (Calvin, *Ibid*, p317). Ball writes: "God will be as good a God to Abraham's seed, as he is to Abraham himself, and that whatsoever right by the covenant was invested upon Abraham, should descend as from a parent under this covenant, to all his seed by virtue of this covenant made with him." (p50). Roberts also affirms: "God's covenant is very comprehensive. It comprises both root, and branches; takes in, both parents, and children. God's lovingkindness, and fatherly care is exceeding extensive and diffusive, not only to Abraham's person, but to his posterity also. . ." (p409). Vos says: "God maintains His covenant of grace with the believer. *But when He gives the promises of the covenant to that believer who is brought into the covenant as an adult, these promises are not only 'for you!' but they are also 'for your seed after you.'* Involved here is a link between the natural relationship between parents and children, on the one hand, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, on the other. This link is not such that it works as a natural law. Grace is not an inheritance that one receives without exception because one has been born of parents who are members of the covenant. In His election God always remains free. But nevertheless the rule remains that He has His covenant continue in history, builds the church from the seed of the church. Thus there is not a founding of a new covenant again and again, but the one covenant is administered throughout the ages and generations. . . God does not reckon solely with individual persons in an atomistic manner. His covenant is established with the children and their children into distant generations." (*Volume 5*, p165). And in summarizing the grounds for infant baptism, Bavinck likewise attests: "The Reformed. . . returned to Scripture and in defending infant baptism unitedly took their position in the covenant of grace, which, according to God's promise, embraces not only believers but also their descendants. Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace gave people, both adults and children, the right to baptism. This covenant was the sure, scriptural, objective ground upon which all the Reformed, together and without distinction, based the right to infant baptism." (*Volume 4*, p525).

<sup>104</sup> "One enters into [God's] covenant in two ways: [1] by freely acceding to and accepting its condition, or by being born into it. In the former case, the inclination to live in the covenant is of course to be assumed. Applied to the covenant of grace, this leads us to the conclusion that an adult hitherto standing outside the covenant relationship can only enter it by faith. By his entering into the covenant, he shows that he will live in and according to the covenant, and this he cannot rightly do without faith. It is thus to be assumed that here entrance into covenant relationship and entrance into covenant fellowship coincide. The first exercise of faith leads, of itself, to both. . . [2] In the second case, where one is born into the covenant, the covenant relationship precedes, in the expectation that covenant fellowship will follow later, so far as conscious life is concerned. . . Only in this way do we obtain an organic connection between being under-the-covenant and being in-the-covenant, between bond

	INITIAL ENTRANCE INTO THE COVENANT	WHICH IS EXPECTED TO BE FOLLOWED BY
ADULT CONVERTS	The Reality: Inward Covenant Faith	The Rite: Outward Covenant Sign
COVENANT CHILDREN	The Rite: Outward Covenant Sign	The Reality: Inward Covenant Faith

We see this clearly in Genesis. And here is what is so important: God nowhere nullifies or reverses or changes this principle when we get to the New Testament. God never says, “We’re going to do it differently from now on. The covenant promise isn’t going to include covenant children anymore, so stop marking them with the covenant sign.” God never says that. Rather, the New Testament *re-emphasizes* everything God had told Abraham in Genesis 17: that His promises still extend to our covenant children, and that we are to continue to mark them with the New Testament covenant sign.

So at Pentecost, Peter referred back to Genesis 17:7 when he said, “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). Now, if Peter was wanting to emphasize that covenant children were no longer going to be included in the Covenant of Grace, the worst thing he could have said was that “the promise is for you *and your children*.”<sup>105</sup> Here in Acts 2, at the very inauguration of the New Covenant age, Peter is harkening back to Genesis 17 and telling his Jewish audience that in the New Covenant, the promise still extends to covenant children in the same way that it did in the covenant with Abraham.<sup>106</sup>

And then we have *the household baptisms* in Acts and Corinthians. Someone believes in Christ and then you see his whole household being baptized. The argument isn’t that mathematically there was probably infants in some of those households. The argument is that this sounds exactly like what was happening in Genesis 17, where Abraham believed, and *his whole household* was baptized. God is using the same pattern of dealing with families in the New Testament as He did in the Old.<sup>107</sup>

and fellowship. The former is, as it were, the shadow that the latter casts. The covenant relationship into which a child enters already at birth is the image of the covenant fellowship in which it is expected to live later. And on the basis of that expectation or, more accurately, on the basis of the promise of God that entitles us to that expectation, such a child receives baptism as a seal of the covenant. The child is regarded as being in the covenant. As it matures, it is again and again pointed out how it lives under the promises and how the reasonable expectation is that it will live in the covenant. The attestations of the covenant precede the substance of the covenant. These promises and this requirement as they apply to the child are precisely the means appointed by God as the way to be traveled, along which the communion of the covenant, the being ‘in’ in a spiritual sense, is reached. Being under-the-covenant not only precedes, but it is also instrumental.” (Vos, V2, pp106-110).

<sup>105</sup> Insight from Ligon Duncan’s *Covenant Theology* course.

<sup>106</sup> In particular, the promise extends to both elect covenant children and Gentile foreigners in the same way that it did with Abraham. The promise of Genesis 17 was 1) to Abraham; 2) to his descendants; and 3) to the foreign Gentile slaves from distant nations who became part of his household. Peter was addressing a Jewish audience—the descendants of Abraham—to whom promise #2 (above) was made—and declaring to them that the promise God had made 1) to Abraham was 2) also to them (as being his descendants), as well as *their* children (remember—it is an everlasting covenant—it didn’t stop with one generation—see Psalm 105:8-10); as well as 3) to all who are far off—that is—foreign Gentiles in distant nations. Thus, the promise of the New Covenant extends to both Gentile foreigners and covenant children in the same way as did the promises to Abraham. It may be objected, how does this verse argue infant baptism? Well, remember, the whole reason Abraham was to give his sons the *covenant sign* was that God had extended to them the *covenant promise*. And Peter is affirming at Pentecost that God’s covenant promise still extended to children of believers now in the same way that it did for Abraham. Spurgeon puts forth this objection: “have you ever heard this text quoted as far as this, ‘For the promise is unto you and to your children’? And then a full stop is put in, to prove, not that an infant ought to be baptized, but that an infant ought to be sprinkled? The argument used by many ministers is that the blessings of the covenant are for believers and their children. . . [but]. . .this passage. . .teaches nothing of the sort. . .Suppose that I were to try and argue thus: ‘The promise is unto you, and to your children, therefore your children ought to be baptized.’ Go on with the text: ‘and to all that are afar off,’ therefore all that are afar off ought to be baptized. That would be the same kind of reasoning; but it would be the drivell of an idiot, with no reasoning in it.” (*A Far Reaching Promise*, Acts 2:39). I love Spurgeon, but here he misses the significance of this passage. *First*, Peter uses the word “promise”, rather than “offer”. Peter isn’t saying that salvation is *offered* to everyone, whether it be the children of believers or pagan foreigners in remote places of the earth. His point is that salvation is *promised* to the elect, including the elect among our children as well as those now darkness; to “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” So then, *secondly*, if this is true, Spurgeon is actually right: We *should* baptize the second group in verse 39; namely: the elect who come to Christ among far off nations. Ultimately, though, this passage is not about *baptism* at all, but about the *covenant*. It’s not describing *who* we baptize, or *when* we baptize (or, for that matter, *how* we baptize!), but simply *why* it is that we baptize: Because of the promise of God. The point is that, as we’ve seen, the whole reason infants received the covenant *sign* in the Old Testament was on the grounds of God’s covenant *promise* in Genesis 17:7. Infants received the covenant sign *because of the covenant promise* which God had made especially to them. That’s the point. So: If the covenant *promise* of salvation is likewise made to children of believers in the new covenant, what’s to keep them from receiving the covenant sign?

<sup>107</sup> See Acts 16:14-15, 33-34; 18:8 (also 10:47-48 with 11:14) and 1 Corinthians 1:16. We could say a lot about these accounts

Then Paul says in *1 Corinthians 7:14* that God considers the children of even one believing parent to be holy: “for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.” This word “holy” is the same word used in the New Testament for professing adult believers (“saints”). Now, this doesn't mean that every covenant child is inwardly or actually holy. But it does mean that covenant children are *externally* and *covenantally* holy: God sees covenant children differently than pagan children. Children of believers are set apart from other children as being part of the covenant community.<sup>108</sup>

*Even the Old Testament prophecies of the new covenant*—which foretell the days of New Testament church—speak of God extending His promises to covenant children. For instance, speaking in the context of Israel's restoration from exile and the ensuing glory of the new covenant church, Moses declared: “Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart *and the heart of your descendants*, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6). Another example is Isaiah 59:21, where the Lord declares, “As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the Lord: ‘My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring,’ says the Lord, ‘from now and forever.’ Not only does the New Testament clearly not revoke the promises made to the children of believers, but the Old Testament clearly prophecies that those promises will continue to be upheld in the new covenant.<sup>109</sup>

We saw earlier that Abraham was to mark his children with the covenant sign *because* God was also extending to them His covenant promises. The whole reason he was to mark them with the *sign* was

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of household baptisms. But one question is, why even use the word “household”? If baptism in the New Testament is only for individuals and not for entire families, why even use the word? Why not say something like: “So Lydia believed, and so did her sister Mary-Sue and her big brother Rex; so they were all baptized”? For those who would be steeped in the language of the Old Testament, the mere usage of the word would call to mind the language and imagery of Genesis 17. Further, we also find this household principle not only in Acts and Corinthians, but, as many point out, in *the gospels* as well. It is the account of Zaccheus, in Luke 19:9. Following the notable change that had taken place in him, the Lord said to him: “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” (Luke 19:9). The older writers noted the precise nature of the Lord's words here. Christ doesn't say: “salvation has come to this man, because he. . . is a son of Abraham”; nor: “salvation has come to this household, because they are sons of Abraham”, but rather: “salvation has come to this house, because he. . . is a son of Abraham.” The Greek word here for house (oikos), though commonly used for a literal house, was also commonly used for posterity and lineage, as in Luke 1:69, “the house of David”; but even more noteworthy, this word was often used in the New Testament (and in Luke's two-volume account in particular) for “household” (Luke 12:52; 16:27; Acts 7:10; 10:2; 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8). The context determines the meaning. But surely, no one in their right mind would claim that the Savior is referring to Zaccheus' physical house in this statement; to claim that a house can be saved! Jesus is speaking of Zaccheus' family; He's referring to his household: “Today salvation has come to this household. . .” Now again: it is Zaccheus alone who the Lord credits as being a “son of Abraham”; and yet the benefits of salvation are imputed to his entire household: “Today salvation has come to this house[hold], because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” How can we understand this but as an outworking of the principle of Genesis 17:7-8, that God's promise to Abraham to be God to him and his seed is not limited to him, but also extended to us? That, just like Abraham, God also promises salvation to our seed? Goodwin writes: “when Zaccheus was thus converted, Christ enlarges his covenant to Zaccheus' family also, ‘This day is salvation come to this house, inasmuch as he is also the son of Abraham,’ (verse 9). Now if Christ's intent had been in this answer given, to show that he. . . though a great sinner, yet was converted as being a son of Abraham (as some expound it), he would have made it the reason but of this only, why Zaccheus was saved himself personally; but he makes it the reason why his house should be saved also, and so the covenant stuck with them of his family likewise, because he the father of the family was now a believer. . . so now being converted, [he] is therefore called a ‘son of Abraham’ and withal had this privilege of Abraham, as being his son. . . to have his house brought into the covenant, even of that of salvation, in conformity to his father Abraham. . . Thus in like manner, when the apostles came to preach the gospel to a Gentile householder, master or father of a family, they carried the offer of it in this tenor, and in the way of this privilege, as a motive to conversion. So when Paul preached to the jailor, Acts 16, he asking, ‘What shall I do to be saved?’ (verse 30), Paul answers, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved;’ and then adds, ‘thou and thine house.’” (*Works*, V9, pp430-31). And Vos says: “When Zacchaeus is called, then the Savior says: ‘Today salvation has come to this house, since he too is a son of Abraham’ (Luke 19:9). This call is based on the promise given for Abraham's seed, and from it flow further blessings for Zacchaeus' seed too.” (V5, p165).

<sup>108</sup> Calvin remarks: “the children of the Jews also, because they had been made heirs of his covenant and distinguished from the children of the impious, were called a holy seed (Ezra 9:2; Isaiah 6:13). For this same reason, the children of Christians are considered holy; and even though born with only one believing parent, by the apostle's testimony they differ from the unclean seed of idolators (1Cor.7:14).” (*Institutes 4.16.6*). Thomas Vincent writes, “As the Jews are called in Scripture a holy nation, because by circumcision they were made visible Church members; so the infants of Christians, as well as themselves, are called holy; that is, federally holy, as they are by baptism made visible Church members” (*Shorter Catechism*, p.252). And Ball says: “Your children are holy’, says the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 7:14. Holy by covenant, though by nature sinful.” (p52).

<sup>109</sup> See also Isaiah 54:10,13; 61:8-9; Jeremiah 32:38-40; Ezekiel 37:25-26. Insight gleaned from G.I. Williamson.

that they were heirs of the *promises*. So, we ask: If the children of believers are still the heirs of *the covenant promises*, why should we stop marking them with *covenant sign*? Further, if God gave us a clear command to mark our infants with the covenant sign, why would we stop? Baptists ask: Where did God command us to mark our children with the covenant sign? We reply: Genesis 17. Our question to them is: Where did God command us to *stop* marking them with the covenant sign?<sup>110</sup>

*F) A Vital CLARIFICATION about Baptism:* Now, having said all that, there's something really important that we need to clarify. We baptize our covenant children because God commands us to—but that baptism doesn't save them. Water baptism never saved anyone.<sup>111</sup> The baptism that saves is the baptism of the heart—the new birth—that only comes about through faith in Christ. Our covenant children must repent of their sins and put their faith in Christ if they would be saved. Baptism is the *outward sign* that God has given to signify membership in the *external* covenant community. But—and this is so vital—the *outward sign* isn't the same thing as the *inward reality*. In other words, there's a difference between being *in the covenant* and being *of the covenant*. All professing believers and their children are considered to be *in the covenant*—but that's not the same thing as saying that they

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<sup>110</sup> G.I. Williamson, in responding to why there is no explicit command to baptize infants in the New Testament, writes: “The reason is that there was no need to give a new command for something that God had already made clear. From the beginning God had included children with their believing parents. It was, from the beginning, God's will that children receive the sign and seal of the covenant along with their parents. Since there was no change in this fact (but only in the form of the sign and seal), there was no need for any specific commandment concerning the children being recipients. To the Baptists who say: 'Show us where God ever put children in the Church,' we say—it is recorded in Genesis 17. To the Baptists we therefore say: 'Now please show us where God ever put the children of believers out!'” (*Shorter Catechism*, pp300-01). In another place, he expands on this further: “we agree, of course, that the New Testament does not contain a specific command to baptize infants. Neither does the New Testament contain a specific command that women are to receive the Lord's Supper. But this is not the same as saying that the Bible contains no such command. The New Testament does not always repeat specific commands which are already recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. . . God, at the beginning of patriarchal history, commanded that the sign and seal of the covenant of grace be given to the children of believers (Gen. 17:1-14). Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that this was an everlasting requirement. It is not true, then, that God has given no commandment with respect to the baptism of children. The Baptist contention is that children may not be baptized without a New Testament commandment. But the need is rather for the Baptists to produce the 'New Testament command' that excludes what God previously commanded. . . Our argument is this: 1) God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children; 2) baptism is now the sign and seal of that covenant concerning which God gave this command (Gal. 3:16-17); 3) God changed the form of the sign and seal but not the everlasting covenant; he did not revoke his command to give the sign and seal to the children of believers; and 4) the New Testament evidence confirms this position.” (*Westminster Confession*, p274).

<sup>111</sup> Baptism never automatically imparts saving grace. This is absolutely vital. As Calvin notes: “The schools of the Sophists have taught with remarkable agreement that the sacraments of the new law (those now used in the Christian church) justify and confer grace, provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin. How deadly and pestilential this notion is cannot be expressed. . . Of a certainty it is diabolical. For in promising a righteousness apart from faith, it hurls souls headlong to destruction. . . But what is a sacrament received apart from faith but the most certain ruin of the church? For nothing ought to be expected from it apart from the promise but the promise no less threatens wrath to unbelievers than offers grace to believers. Hence, any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God's Word and received by him in true faith. . . the Lord's morsel was poison to Judas. . .” (*Institutes*, 4.16.14-15). Bavinck writes: “The Council of Trent decreed that the New Testament sacraments contain grace in themselves and impart it to all who place no obstacle in its path, so that in baptism also the children receive grace and the virtues *ex opere operato* (by the act performed) and though they are not believers beforehand, they become believers by baptism. . . Also a number of Reformed theologians (Pareus, Baronius, Forbes a' Corse, Davenant, Ward, de Brais in Saumur, et al.) taught that in baptism all children received a certain grace of forgiveness and regeneration that, if they died young, was sufficient for salvation. . . And corresponding to this is the doctrine of the High Churchmen (in the Anglican Church) who believe in baptismal regeneration. This doctrine too is open to many objections. . . Baptism is robbed of its scriptural character when it is detached from faith and the Word, ceases to be a sign and seal of God's promises, becomes an independent self-operative means of grace, and even takes first place among the means of grace. . . The Reformed therefore returned to Scripture and in defending infant baptism unitedly took their position in the covenant of grace, which, according to God's promise, embraces not only believers but also their descendants. Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace gave people, both adults and children, the right to baptism. . . The basis for baptism is not the assumption that someone is regenerate, nor even that (there is) regeneration itself, but only the covenant of God. . . Although baptism, like the external calling, still produces many a blessing even for unbelievers, its true fruit and full power can only be enjoyed by believers. . . God remains true to himself and bestows salvation on everyone who believes. But faith is not everyone's possession. Ultimately the fruit of baptism is only enjoyed by those who are elect and therefore come to faith in God's time.” (V4, pp524-25, 531-32). And Vos says: “Here and there in some Reformed theologians a conception intrudes that appears to function at the boundary of the orthodox system, so that one may doubt that it may still be called Reformed. There have been those who posit a kind of justification and regeneration at baptism, signified and conveyed to all the children of covenant members, without exception, but then not necessarily connected to salvation, since it can be lost through the fault of the children in growing up. . . We can clearly discover in this outlook the endeavor to give a real, tangible content to baptism. But it is, as Witsius observes, a failed endeavor. . . the view mentioned is not tenable for one who is Reformed.” (V5, pp171-73).



are all *of the covenant*.<sup>112</sup> The fact is, there are some covenant children who never truly embrace the covenant from the heart.<sup>113</sup> We might think of it this way: All the children of believers are born into the *realm of the covenant*, and for this reason we are to mark them all with *the rite (or sign) of the covenant*, but this by no means guarantees that they are all possessors of the *reality of the covenant*.

UNDER THE COVENANT REALM VERSUS POSSESSING THE COVENANT REALITY

	BELONG TO THE COVENANT OF GRACE		MARKED BY	MEMBERS OF
THOSE MERELY UNDER THE <i>REALM</i> OF THE COVENANT	As only under its Administration	Only Externally; Only Outwardly	Only the Covenant Sign	Only the Visible Church
THOSE TRULY POSSESSING THE <i>REALITY</i> OF THE COVENANT	As true partakers of its Essence	Externally <i>and</i> Internally; Outwardly <i>and</i> Inwardly	The Sign <i>and</i> the Reality	The Visible <i>and</i> the Invisible Church

This is exactly what we see in the Old Testament with circumcision. Abraham was commanded to circumcise both Ishmael and Isaac; but Romans tells us that it was only Isaac who was the true child of promise. Likewise Isaac was commanded to circumcise both his sons, Jacob and Esau; but Scripture tells us that Esau was never saved: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Romans 9:13). Esau was circumcised *outwardly*, but he was never circumcised *inwardly*.<sup>114</sup> Esau was a covenant child; but he rejected the God of the covenant.<sup>115</sup> This is why Paul warns us in Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit. . .”<sup>116</sup> Circumcision never saved anybody. There were *great privileges* that came along with circumcision and being part of the covenant community (Romans 3:1-2). But it never guaranteed your salvation. For, while it was true that Gentile outsiders could be *grafted into* the covenant promises by faith, it was also true that circumcised covenant children who refused to embrace the God of the covenant would be *cut off from* the covenant promises. Old Testament covenant children could be either covenant *keepers* or covenant *breakers*—those who embraced the covenant from the heart by faith, or those who didn't.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>112</sup> We could also put it this way: All children of believers are in the covenant, but we cannot say with certainty that the covenant is in all of them: covenant children are not all children of promise. This distinction between being *in* and *of* the covenant is the language of Bavinck. He says: “Certainly, there are bad branches on the vine, and there is chaff among the wheat; and in a large house, there are vessels of gold as well as vessels of earthenware. . . But we do not have the right and the power to separate the two: in the day of the harvest, God himself will do this. . . Though not *of* the covenant, they are *in* the covenant and will someday be judged accordingly.” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V3, p232). Vos at times points to the same truth by using slightly different language. Posing the question, “Who is in the covenant?”, Vos at first gives a two-fold answer: “on the one side: All the members of the visible church are in; on the other side: Only they who have saving faith are in. Both of these are true, but in a different sense.” (Volume 2, p105). He goes on to explain what he means, and distinguishes between being “under” the covenant (outwardly and formally) versus being “in” the covenant (inwardly and truly) (V2, pp105-111).

<sup>113</sup> We say *covenant children* here in particular because we're talking about infant baptism. But this truth isn't limited to those who are baptized as infants. There are adults too, who profess faith and are baptized, who later walk away from the faith.

<sup>114</sup> Not only was Esau never saved, but God declares specifically of him that he was never elect. This means that even before Esau was born, though God had specifically testified that He hadn't chosen him (Romans 9:13), yet still, according to God's command (cf. Genesis 17), Esau was still to be circumcised. G.I. Williamson draws out the significance of this truth in his commentary on the *Westminster Confession*: “[Esau] was circumcised by divine command. Yet it was certain (even before he was born) that he would never have union with Christ (Rom. 9:11-13). In this instance it cannot be argued that Esau was improperly circumcised. Neither can it be argued that Esau was circumcised because it was presumed that he was, or would be, in union with Christ. It can be argued only that God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children even though it could not be presumed that they were, or would be, in union with Christ.” (Williamson, p278).

<sup>115</sup> This is described for us most vividly, not only in the New Testament, but in the Genesis narrative as well. Genesis 36:1-8 recounts the tragic day that Esau walked away from the faith, bringing his household with him (and not only his immediate household, but his offspring for generations to come, v9-43). Here, we're told: “Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob.” (v6). We've seen that the land of Canaan represented so much more than a physical place; it was the Church. So this was not simply a neutral move to a different location. When Esau left the land, it wasn't just a *geographical* move, it was a *spiritual* one; Esau was making the decision to leave the Church.

<sup>116</sup> Alec Motyer draws out three practical inferences from Romans 2:25-29: 1) The outward sign conveys no [eternal] benefit inevitably attached to it (verse 28): *IE, circumcision and baptism never guaranteed salvation* (cf. Esau and Simon in Acts 8:13); 2) The outward sign conveys no [eternal] benefit which cannot be had without it (verse 26): *IE, circumcision and baptism were never necessary for salvation* (cf. Paul's argument about Abraham in Romans 4:9-12 and the dying thief in Luke 23:33,43); and 3) The enjoyment [or appropriation] of the spiritual reality which God has associated with the outward sign depends on the relation of the heart towards God (verse 29): *IE, Circumcision and baptism signify salvation—but that salvation is itself only obtained through faith in Christ.* (Taken from *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, pp37-40).

<sup>117</sup> David repeats over and over in Psalm 37 the warning that the wicked would be *cut off* (v9,22,28,34,38). The allusion to

And the same is true of baptism in the New Testament church. *In Matthew 13*, Jesus tells a parable about a dragnet. The net represents the kingdom of heaven. It's cast into the sea and is filled with fish. It doesn't capture all the fish in the sea—just a small portion. But when the net is filled, they drag it up to the beach, and they begin to sort out the good fish from the bad fish. There's both good and bad fish in the net; and it's sorted out at the judgment. And that's the way it is in the church. There's good fish and bad fish, and Jesus is going to sort it out at the judgment.<sup>118</sup> Or, think about *John 15:2*, where Jesus says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.” Who are the branches that are *in Jesus* but not bearing any fruit, that are later (in verse 6) cast into the fire? They're members of the visible church—but they've never been born again. They're members of the covenant community, but they've never truly embraced the covenant from the heart by faith. They've got a baptismal certificate up on the wall, but they've never experienced the baptism of the heart. Don't let that happen to you.

You see, being a part of the covenant community is a *wonderful* thing—but it's also a *dangerous* thing. It was a wonderful thing to be a part of the Old Testament covenant community—but once you were part of that community—if you turned your back on the Lord—do you know what happened? You were put to death for covenantal treason.<sup>119</sup> Because circumcision was a sign of salvation, but it was also a sign of judgment. And so is baptism. Baptism is a sign of salvation—the waters of regeneration. But it's also a sign of judgment—the waters of Noah. It's a wonderful thing to be a part of the New Testament covenant community; but it's also a dangerous thing, because covenant breakers will be judged even more severely than unbelievers.<sup>120</sup> And so we teach these things to our children. We admonish them, we warn them, we plead with them to embrace the God of the covenant by faith.<sup>121</sup>

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circumcision here is striking; it's meant to warn those who bear the covenant sign. At times *cutting off* took place through the OT equivalent of excommunication (Genesis 17:14; cf. 1 Cor. 5:13); but the prophets were constantly warning that many among the covenant community would be cut off in the sifting that took place at the final judgment (cf. Romans 11:17-22). Witsius puts it this way: “as the inheritance of the land of Canaan was a type of the heavenly inheritance, and the national covenant included the spiritual covenant of grace; so also the exclusion from the national covenant and typical inheritance, was a sign of the exclusion from the covenant of grace and the heavenly inheritance.” (V2, p153). As also O Palmer Robertson notes: “First of all, the *'grafting' principle* must be remembered. . . 'Israel' cannot be restricted in its essence to an ethnic community. Israel must include the proselyte who does not belong to 'Israel' according to the flesh, but is absorbed into Israel by process of ingrafting. The New Testament displays an awareness of this principle when it speaks of the 'ingrafting' of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:17,19). . . By the process of 'ingrafting,' the Gentile becomes an 'Israelite' in the fullest possible sense (cf. Gal. 3:29). From the point of ingrafting, his subsequent seed becomes heir to the promises given to Abraham. His line now stands as legitimate heir to the genealogical promises given to the patriarch. Secondly. . . the *'pruning' principle* must be noted. Not only is it possible for a new branch to be grafted into genealogical relation to Abraham. It is also possible for a natural seed of Abraham to be removed from its position of privilege. This principle also may be traced back into the earliest experience of the line of promise. To demonstrate the sovereignty of God in the electing process, it was said, 'Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated' (Rom. 9:13; cf. Mal. 1:2,3; Gen. 25:23). This concept of pruning also must be given full weight in the definition of 'Israel.' Again, 'Israel' cannot be identified merely as ethnic descendants of Abraham, for 'they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel' (Rom. 9:6). It is those who, in addition to being related to Abraham by natural descendency, also relate to him by faith, plus those Gentiles who are ingrafted by faith, that constitute the true Israel.” (Palmer Robertson, p40).

<sup>118</sup> Insight gratefully gleaned from Aaron Myers, Providence PCA, in his baptism sermon.

<sup>119</sup> See Deuteronomy 17:2-7 for just one example. This truth as well as its application for us is exactly the point of the author of Hebrews when he writes: “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:28-29).

<sup>120</sup> As Vos says: “If one is under the covenant relationship[;] and covenant fellowship, the essence of the covenant, is missing, one is nevertheless treated as a covenant member in the sense that nonobservance of the covenant incurs guilt and causes covenant-breaking. This explains how there is covenant-breaking and yet no apostasy of the saints. Note carefully, not merely temporary covenant-breaking is in view—for in believers that is compatible with perseverance—but final covenant-breaking. Everyone who is under the covenant is treated as though he lived in the covenant. It is so with the covenant of works, and is so with the covenant of grace. And therefore, one does not have the right to say that the nonelect are in no way in the covenant. For them there is no true covenant fellowship, but their accountability is determined according to the covenant relationship. *This accountability is greater than that which an ordinary person outside the covenant has in relation to the gospel.* Being in-the-covenant may never be diminished to a life under the offer of the gospel. It is more than that.” (V2, p107). Duncan says: “The covenantal relationship may be fulfilled in either blessing or curse. If the person who has received the sign of the covenant rejects the covenant, by not being a person who believes and repents, by refusing to truly embrace the covenant in the heart, then that person, by the sign of the covenant, by the sign of circumcision, is sealed to a double curse. Not only is that person cursed unto the Covenant of Works, they're cursed for a false application of the Covenant of Grace.”

<sup>121</sup> Calvin made use of the example of the Jews to warn his hearers: “But the chief point is, that we must learn to be the true children of Abraham. Seeing we be grafted into his stock through faith let us take heed that we be not cut off from this body

G) *A Brief SUMMARY:* Let's try to summarize briefly what we've learned so far:

- 1) The covenant promises to Abraham were about salvation in the fullest sense.
- 2) The covenant promises were made not only to Abraham *but also* to his offspring.
- 3) The covenant sign of circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of that salvation:
  - a) Abraham was marked with circumcision to signify his faith only *after* he believed.
  - b) Yet he was then to apply that same sign to his infant sons *before* belief was possible.
- 4) New Testament believers have entered into the same covenant promises made to Abraham.
- 5) The Scriptures teach that those covenant promises still extend to our children.
- 6) Thus, our infant children should continue to be marked with the covenant sign.
- 7) This doesn't mean that all Abraham's children (or ours) will be saved: this is by faith alone.
- 8) But it does mean that our children are included in the covenant and should receive the sign.<sup>122</sup>

H) *The MYSTERY in the Covenant:* There's one question that still remains. We've seen that the essence of God's covenant with Abraham was about salvation in the fullest sense: The Lord was promising to be Abraham's God. And further, in Genesis 17, we find that God promised not only to be the God of Abraham, but to be the God of his descendants after him (vv7-8). We've seen that this is the whole reason Abraham was to circumcise his children: God commanded Abraham to give his children the *sign* of the promise (in Genesis 17:9-14) because God had declared them also to be the *heirs* of the promise (in Genesis 17:7-8). But, there is a significant question we have to answer at this point: If God was actually promising salvation to Abraham's descendants, how could it ever be that there were any of his descendants (like Esau) who were never saved? And, in the same way, if God is making the same promises to us and our children that He did to Abraham and his children, how is it

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by our unbelief. For the prophets who were the true exponents of the law, do well declare what the thing is which God aims at in this place, when they say: 'Come you of the stock of Abraham? No you are the children of a harlot every one of you. Get you hence you harlot brats, appear here in your likeness, come forth and let men know you, you children of a strumpet (says the prophet Isaiah; 57:3). And the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak in like sort: 'What have you like unto Abraham whose name you bear? Was not your father an Amorite and your mother a whore?' To whom spoke they thus? Spoke they to children of harlots and unto bastards concerning the flesh? No. But unto lawful born children. And why then calls he them strumpets children, as if they were begotten in some brothel-house? Because they were corrupted and followed not the faith of Abraham. For the true parentage is spiritual (as St. Paul says). They which descended from the stock of Abraham concerning the flesh, are not therefore accounting the lineage of Abraham. . . So then let us note that when Moses forbade that bastards should enter into the temple, it was not only for this shameful note which is in respect of the world, when children are not begotten in lawful wedlock; it was rather to show that the Jews were not worthy to have any access unto God, to call upon his name, or to company with His congregation, except they held fast this spiritual kindred of Abraham, that is to say, except they followed his faith, and except they continued in that pure covenant of God.'" (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, pp796-97).

<sup>122</sup> We could also summarize this in four points as G.I. Williamson has (quoted earlier): 1) God commanded believers to give the sign and seal of the covenant to their children; 2) baptism is now the sign and seal of that covenant concerning which God gave this command; 3) God changed the form of the sign and seal but not the everlasting covenant; he did not revoke his command to give the sign and seal to the children of believers; and 4) the New Testament evidence confirms this position (*The Westminster Confession of Faith For Study Classes*; p274). Ligon Duncan asks three questions: 1) Is baptism a covenant sign? 2) Are children of believing parents part of the covenant now (in the New Covenant) in the same way that they were under the Old Covenant? 3) If God gave promises and a sign of His promises to believers and their children in the Old Testament (and He did), should we give the sign of the promises that He makes to believers and their children in the New Testament to both believers and their children? (from his *Covenant Theology* course). Hodge argues for infant baptism in this way: "1) The Visible Church is a divine institution; 2) The Visible Church does not consist exclusively of the regenerate; 3) The commonwealth of Israel was the Church; 4) The Church under the new dispensation is identical with that under the old; 5) The terms of admission into the Church before the Advent were the same that are required for admission into the Christian Church; 6) Infants were members of the Church under the Old Testament economy; 7) There is nothing in the New Testament which justifies the exclusion of the children of believers from membership in the Church; 8) Children need, and are capable of receiving the benefits of redemption." (V3, pp546-58). And Roberts argues thus: "1) The new covenant under which Abraham's Christian seed are, is for substance one and the same with this covenant under, which Abraham's Jewish seed were. . . 2) The infants of Abraham's Christian seed are in covenant with their parents now; as well as the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed were in covenant with their parents then. . . 3) This sacramental inauguration of the infants of Abraham's seed God established and commanded under the Old Testament, and hath never forbidden it under the New Testament. . . 4) Baptism has succeeded in the room and stead of circumcision, as the Apostle clearly testifies [in Colossians 2:10-12]. . . 5) The federal grace and privileges of Abraham's Christian seed under the New Testament are as large and larger then those of Abraham's Jewish seed under the Old Testament; therefore if the infants of his Jewish seed were circumcised then, much more the infants of his Christian seed should be baptized now. . . 6) The infants of Abraham's Christian seed now, are every way as capable of baptism, as the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed then, could be capable of circumcision. . . 7) No objection can be made against the baptizing of the infants of Abraham's Christian seed; but the same objections will militate and may be urged as strongly every way against the circumcising of the infants of Abraham's Jewish seed." (pp317-18).

that any of our children come short of salvation? Do you see the tension? *If God's promise was of salvation, and that promise extends to our children, then what do we make of the countless instances (both in the Old and New Testament church) of covenant children who walk away from the Lord?* This is an extremely important question, which traditionally, has been answered in two different ways:

1) *Some view God's promise in Genesis 17:7 to be more of a CONDITIONAL OFFER.* God isn't actually promising salvation to our children—He's offering it to them. Those who hold this view say that God is not making an absolute promise to the children of believers to be their God; He's merely making them a conditional offer. What is the offer? God will be their God if they indeed put their faith in Him. God will be their God as long as the covenant child indeed takes Him to be his God. In other words, God isn't truly making an absolute promise; He's only extending to covenant children a conditional offer. He's putting an offer on the table. But at the end of the day, it's all contingent on the response of the covenant child. Salvation is offered. But it can be either accepted or rejected.<sup>123</sup>

The first problem with this view is that an offer is something very different than a promise. When we read Genesis 17:7, we don't find the Lord *offering* to be the God of Abraham's descendants—rather, we find the Lord *promising* Abraham that He will be their God. He tells him: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to you descendants after you.” This is more than just *an offer*—this is *a promise* God is making to Abraham. And when God makes promises, He keeps His promises. Further, if we believe what Scripture says about our inherent depravity—that naturally, every single one of us is not only *not able* to come to Christ, but *not willing* to come to Him—then it doesn't make any sense for God to give this kind of offer to our children. Truth is, if God offers us salvation—and that's all He does—none of us would ever be saved. The whole reason God's covenant grace is so awesome is that He does so much more than just *offer* these things to us. He doesn't just call us—He *chooses* us. He doesn't just invite us to come—He *draws* us. He doesn't just offer us life—He *raises us from the dead*. He doesn't just point out the way—He actually picks us up, puts us on His shoulders, and carries us back home (Ephesians 2:1-5). This is our God. Praise be to Him.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Hoeskema describes this “conditional offer” view in this way: “According to this view, the promise is for all who are born under the covenant, for all the children of believing parents, for all who are baptized. In the promise God bequeaths all the blessings of the covenant upon all who are baptized. He gives all the right to those blessings. . . However, this promise must necessarily be presented as conditional. It is contingent for its fulfillment upon the faith of those who are baptized. They are obliged to believe the promise, to fulfill their covenant obligation, their part of the covenant of God. If they fail in this, the blessings of the covenant do not actually come into their possession.” (Hoeskema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, V2, p377). It seems that there are several distinguishable sub-views under this larger category of the “conditional offer” view. James Beeke categorizes two of them. The first he describes as technically offered to all covenant children but truly guaranteed to the elect among them. The second he describes as offered to all covenant children equally but not actually guaranteed to any of them (*Bible Doctrine for Teens and Young Adults*, pp357-60). The second of these is far more dangerous, as we will see.

<sup>124</sup> Of the first “conditional offer” view (see above footnote), James Beeke says: “This covenant division denies the eternalness and unbreakableness of the Covenant of Grace, for God's offer of salvation is neither eternal nor unbreakable. The Covenant of Grace is reduced to only a breakable offer and conditional promise.” Of the second “conditional offer” view, he says: “The essence of the Covenant promises can be confirmed by faith, or broken by rejection, in the lives of the baptized seed. This presentation of the covenants. . . denies the unbreakableness of the Covenant of Grace. . . Man can break all the promises of the Covenant through his unbelief.” (*Bible Doctrine for Teens and Young Adults*, James Beeke, pp359-360). Vos simply notes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*: “there is more in that sealing of baptism than a conditional offer of the covenant; there are positive promises of God.” (*Volume 5*, p185). And in another place he writes: “in a very special sense, the covenant of grace is presented in Scripture as an indissoluble covenant, in which God always keeps His promise. Mountains may depart and hills be removed; the covenant of His peace does not depart and is not removed (Isaiah 54:10). Now, one could suppose this is intended conditionally, namely, that God keeps His promise if we meet our obligation. But that would not be a specific mark of the covenant of grace; that could apply just as well to the covenant of works. And the covenant of grace is distinguished from the covenant of works precisely by the fact that it no longer depends on human willing or running but on the faithfulness of God.” (*Volume 2*, p99). A little later he continues: “We here face the difficulty that the covenant relationship appears powerless to bring covenant fellowship in its wake. We get a covenant that remains unfruitful. A barren, judicial relationship, an 'ought to be,' appears to take the place of the glorious realities that mention of the covenant brings to our minds. This is in fact the point where, by means of the covenant idea, the Pelagian error could gain access to Reformed doctrine. If the covenant idea is in fact the all-encompassing expression of life under and in grace, how then can it be that in this form it comes to us first of all as something that 'ought to be,' a relationship that still lacks realization? . . . It makes no sense that God enters into a covenant with man unable to help himself, yet in terms of which faith and repentance are expected of him, if absolutely no provision is made to cause the covenant to become reality. But the Lord does not establish a covenant of grace with believers and their seed only in order to obligate them from the heart and increase their responsibility toward the gospel. The covenant relationship must be more than a bond of obligation. . . in this covenant of grace, God in fact

2) *The traditional way to view Genesis 17:7 has always been as an ABSOLUTE PROMISE.* God is not just offering to draw our children to himself; He's actually promising to do so. But the question remains: How do we reconcile this promise with what we know both from Scripture and from our own experience—that not all covenant children do indeed embrace the God of the covenant from the heart, by faith? How do we resolve this tension that on the one hand, God is actually promising to effectually draw our covenant children to himself, and yet we know that there are some among them that He actually doesn't draw in this way? There is a single answer that has been given in response to this question among those in the Reformed tradition: God *is* truly promising to effectually draw our covenant children to himself, *but* this doesn't mean that He's necessarily promising to draw each and every one of them. What do we mean by this? The promise is real. But it's not necessarily made to every covenant child without exception. It's made, rather, to *the elect among* our covenant children.

Think about what we see with the patriarchs. God promised Abraham that He would be the God of His descendants. But we come to learn as we continue to read Genesis that God was not actually promising to be God to every single one of them: He fulfilled this promise in Isaac, but He passed over Ishmael. It was the same with Isaac's children: the Lord was pleased to choose Jacob and draw him to himself, but He passed over Esau. The Lord was faithful to keep the promise He made to Abraham, to be not only his God, but the God of his children and grandchildren after him. But what we see is that God wasn't actually promising to be God to each and every child. He was promising to be God to the elect among them. This is the very thing Paul draws out for us in Romans 9. He tells us that God chose Isaac, but not Ishmael. He chose Jacob, but not Esau. Paul isn't just teaching us here about the doctrine of election *in general*—he's actually teaching us about election *as it relates to covenant families*. So, if we ask: How can God's promise be true that He will effectually draw our children to himself, when experience shows us that there are some among them that never believe? Paul gives the answer in Romans 9:6-8: "it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: through Isaac your descendants will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."<sup>125</sup>

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makes promises that enable the members of His covenant to really live in the covenant, to receive its essence, to make it a reality. . . And therefore, that seed is not merely under a conditional bond, but also under an absolute promise. For those who do not venture to accept this, the covenant concept must more and more lose its spiritual and gracious character. They make it an arid system of obligations, in which all comforting and enlivening power is lacking." (Vos, *Volume 2*, pp107-08).

<sup>125</sup> As Calvin explains from Genesis 17:7: "the promise by which the Lord had adopted them all as children, was common to all; and in that promise, it cannot be denied, that eternal salvation was offered to all. What, therefore, can be the meaning of Paul, when he denies that certain persons have any right to be reckoned among children, except that he is no longer reasoning about the externally offered grace, but about that of which only the elect effectually partake? Here, then, a twofold class of sons presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are in this respects accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all; but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith. And although this difference flows from the fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs; yet, since the counsel of God is in itself hidden from us, we therefore distinguish the true from the spurious children, by the respective marks of faith and of unbelief." And again, Calvin writes: "For in calling Abraham, God extended the promise of salvation unto his whole lineage. He said unto Abraham, 'I will be the God of thy lineage after thee.' Here then is a general election (as they term it) of the whole people. . . And in very deed, the sign of circumcision was as a seal, to warrant all the offspring of that race, that God was their Savior; and so, that was such a grace as was common to all the children of Abraham. Howbeit, there is another second election or choosing, which is (as you would say) straighter; namely, that out of the same lineage God chooses whom He thinks good. . . So then, Jacob was chosen, and Esau refused. . . Herein we see that God having chosen a people in general, does notwithstanding reserve liberty to himself, to choose out of that people whomsoever he wishes, and to refuse the rest. And so as I have declared already, there is one election which God makes generally, and another (particularly) of those whom he vouchsafes to take for his children and heirs." (*Sermons on Deuteronomy*, pp315-16). Ball says simply: "In respect of the external administration of the covenant they were counted the seed; but they walked not in the steps of the faith of Abraham, and therefore in deed and truth they were not the seed." (p52). And Goodwin notes: "As election was free in choosing the Jews, and is free in the choice of those Jews who are to come, and yet God took in this respect too their fathers in it notwithstanding, so it is in ours, and so it goes not by birth as the moving cause, but as the subserving instrument or means to manifest that his love the more, both to the father and the child. And therefore. . . God oftentimes, if not usually, to show his grace takes not all the seed: 'Do you say wherein have I loved you; was not Esau Jacob's brother, yet I loved Jacob, and hated Esau?' (Malachi 1:2)." (*Works*, V9, p474). G.H. Kersten: "Those who teach a Covenant of Grace that only consists of an offer of God that He will give salvation on condition of faith and repentance, actually return to Rome. For Rome teaches that the Covenant of Grace does not give salvation, but only the possibility of being saved. Calvin opposed this doctrine with all his might, and with him and right-minded Reformed

*D) Final REFLECTIONS:* Scripture teaches us that the Lord chose Jacob, not Esau. This passage is hard enough already. A lot of people struggle to think that God would choose some people and not others. But the passage becomes even harder when we think about who these brothers were. Jacob and Esau weren't just any children. They were *covenant children*. As Christian parents, the thing we long for most in this world is for our children to come to know Christ. And the thing that terrifies us more than anything is the thought of that not happening. So these are hard truths for us as parents.

But this passage in Romans 9 isn't here in Scripture to make us think that God probably won't draw all our children to himself. That's not its purpose. This passage isn't here to discourage us. It's here, rather, to remind us of a truth we desperately need to hear; which is this: God is the One who must save our children. This is something that is exceedingly beyond us—this is something *God* must do.

*And so, God invites us to PRAYER.* If the salvation of our children truly depends wholly upon God, then this should take us to our knees. God wants us to plead with him for the souls of our precious children. And He hears and answers those prayers. In Mark 10:13-16, we read of parents bringing their little children to Jesus, and of Him taking them in His arms and blessing them. These parents were helpless in and of themselves, but they could bring their children to Jesus—and *Jesus didn't turn them away*.<sup>126</sup> Nor did He just bless some of them. The children that were brought to Him were the children that He blessed. Some argue infant baptism from this passage. But whether it proves infant baptism or not, there's no doubt about one thing: *When we bring our children to Jesus for a blessing, He never turns us away.* So pray for your children (and with them). Bring them to Jesus in prayer.

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theologians. Not one of them separated the Covenant of Grace from election. . .this organic unity of the elect as the body of Christ and the spiritual offspring of Abraham, is fully revealed in the Covenant of Grace. Scripture refers to this when it speaks of the covenant established with Abraham and his seed. That was the great promise of the covenant: 'I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee,' not as if grace were transplanted from father to a son, but rather that God would bring forth a spiritual seed out of Abraham, that is the children of promise as Isaac was. They form a spiritual offspring, one body, one church, chosen by the Father, purchased by the blood of Christ. Thus election and the covenant are not to be separated. . .The Lord excluded Ishmael, although he was circumcised and many temporal blessings were promised to him. . .Ishmael is sent away, and shall not be heir with the son of the free woman, although he also belonged to the natural seed of Abraham. The Lord established the covenant with Abraham and his spiritual seed, in other words, with the elect. They, and only they, are incorporated in the covenant. . .Peter indeed said, 'For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off,' but then he emphatically limits it by adding, 'even as many as the Lord our God shall call.' And those called by God are the elect." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V1, pp246-47). Hoeksema: "it has pleased God to have His covenant upon earth run in the line of fleshly generations, while there are nevertheless those among the children of believers who were not elected. . .God, according to His own purpose, takes up into His covenant according to its outward form all the fleshly children, while nevertheless only a remnant is saved." (*Believers and their Seed*, p126). And Vos writes: "in this covenant of grace, God in fact makes promises that enable the members of His covenant to really live in the covenant, to receive its essence, to make it a reality. God, when He establishes the covenant of grace with a believer, appears as a giving, a gracious, and promising God, for He witnesses in the gospel that it is He Himself who has generated faith in the soul, whereby the covenant is sealed and received. He further assures such believers that He is not only their God, but also the God of their seed. And that if they raise up their seed for Him, He will grant the grace of regeneration, whereby the covenant will be perpetuated, and that not only as a bond but also as a real, spiritual covenant fellowship. God has pledged to the members of His covenant His promises of regenerating grace for their seed as well. From their seed, He will call believers to Himself. And therefore, that seed is not merely under a conditional bond, but also under an absolute promise. For those who do not venture to accept this, the covenant concept must more and more lose its spiritual and gracious character. They make it an arid system of obligations, in which all comforting and enlivening power is lacking. Because God has thus established in the parents the covenant with the children, He has also given the promise that He will bestow the operations of His grace in the line of the covenant. He can also work outside that line and does so frequently. But then it is a free action, not to be explained further for us. It is an establishing of the covenant anew. In accordance with His sovereignty, He can also make exceptions within the sphere of the covenant. However, if experience later shows such exceptions, we may not seize on them to say, 'God's covenant was powerless; His word has failed.' In such a case, we must always follow the rule of Paul in Romans 9:6-8: 'But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.' The presumption is always that the children of the covenant, who are under the covenant bond, will also be led into covenant fellowship. Election is free, but it is not on that account arbitrary. Therefore, we say: Of those born under the covenant, not only is it required with double force that they believe and repent, but it is likewise expected and prayed for with a double confidence that they will be regenerated in order to be able to believe and repent." (*Reformed Dogmatics*, V2, pp108-09).

<sup>126</sup> I absolutely love what Alec Motyer says about this passage: "Either the Lord Jesus was perpetrating a spiritual hoax for the sentimental satisfaction of doting mothers, or else he saw babies as proper recipients of divine blessing, and proceeded to bestow such a blessing upon them." (From his book, *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, p46).

*God also calls us to NURTURE.* It's true that God must save our children. But it's also true that He does so as we make use of the particular means that He's given to us. One of those means is prayer. Another means that He's given us is nurturing our children. *Part of this is teaching them.* In Genesis 18:19, the Lord declares this about Abraham: "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." We learn several things here,<sup>127</sup> but maybe the most important is that God uses appointed *means* to bring about His promised *ends*. The Lord would fulfill His promises to Abraham about his children as Abraham taught them to keep the way of the Lord.<sup>128</sup> This was *the means* that God would use. And so, God draws our children to himself as we open up His Word to them and instruct them in His ways; as we admonish them, and charge them—even command them to follow the Lord.<sup>129</sup> So, part of nurturing is teaching. *But it also involves other things:* loving our children, cherishing them, being patient with them, being compassionate towards them—setting before them an example of gospel-living every day. Now, this doesn't mean being perfect. Actually, it means acknowledging to them just how imperfect you are. It means modeling repentance, which includes asking even their forgiveness when you sin against them.

So, we plead for our children—we bring them to Jesus asking for a blessing. We call upon Him to do in and for our children what we cannot. We wrestle for them like Jacob wrestled with God: "I will not let you go unless you bless *them*." We pray for them and we pray with them. We claim God's covenant promises for them. And we affectionately teach them and admonish them to keep the ways of the Lord. We teach them about sin and why it is we so badly need a Savior; and that Mommy and Daddy are sinners who need a Savior too, just as much as they do. We show them how precious and wonderful and sufficient Jesus is to wash away all of our sin and give us new hearts. And with God's help, we give them a living example of what it means to walk with God. And we do all these things with expectation, knowing that God has chosen us for the purpose of confirming His promises to our children (Genesis 18:19), and that God fulfills those promises as we lovingly nurture and admonish them; and as we bring them to Jesus in prayer, asking Him alone to do for them what we cannot.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Matthew Henry draws out several truths here, such as: 1) *WHO he was to teach:* Not just his wife, but his children, and all those under the authority of his household; and his instruction was not only for the benefit of those presently in his household, but for his household "after him"; that is, he taught with a view to unborn generations yet to come; 2) *WHAT he was to teach:* Not just instruction about the Lord (though never less than that), but how "to keep the way of the Lord"; that is, not just merely head knowledge about God but a wholly practical religion; as well as, 3) *HOW he was to teach:* Not just suggesting but actually commanding his children to follow the Lord: making them understand who they are as covenant children and their duty to embrace the covenant from the heart—to prove themselves covenant keepers by faith, rather than covenant breakers.

<sup>128</sup> The language here is intentional: God would fulfill His promises *as* Abraham did these things *not* if Abraham did these things. John Gill rightly draws out here that the final clause "so that" signifies *consequence* rather than *cause*. Abraham's instruction is *not* the *condition* which determined whether or not God would fulfill His promises; it's rather simply the *means* through which God would fulfill His promises. God is *not* saying: Abraham, *if* you do this right, *then* I will cause your children to walk in My ways. Rather, God is saying: Abraham, teach your children to walk in My ways—*for it is in this way* that I will bring about all that I have promised to them. Abraham commanding his children to follow the Lord is *not the condition* of God fulfilling His promises to his children, but rather simply *the way* through which God would fulfill those promises.

<sup>129</sup> Notice the language in Genesis 18:19. This is echoed later in Joshua 24:15: "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

<sup>130</sup> Another question that may arise here is: *How should we view our covenant children?* Vos answers this question in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 5, pp173-188. In short, he says: "On this there are two views that have both had defenders, though not both equally. We first give, in some propositions, the most common view that on good grounds can be called the historic-Calvinistic view." (p177). He goes on to describe the view as: "e) Communion in this grace can only be made known to us from certain fruits and marks; f) No one, and so also the church, can judge with certainty who are those who share in this grace. . . Only believers themselves by the witness of the Holy Spirit have a direct assurance of that; g) The church, as ministers of God's covenant, has to observe certain external marks of the grace of God and to act thereon according to the judgment of charity, without concerning itself further with the question. . . ; h) This judgment of charity concerns all the members of the visible church, and only them. To these members belong not only the adults who profess Christ, and do not contradict this profession by their conduct, but also young children born of believing parents belong by virtue of the promise made to Abraham and his descendants and by which they, like their parents, are included in the covenant of God; i) Consequently, with regard to the judgment of the church, birth from believing parents (at least one) is the equivalent of what for the parents their profession of faith is; j) Therefore, according to the judgment of charity, salvation is ascribed to these children and they are regarded as elect, as their parents are regarded when they make profession of faith, and continue to be as long as they in fact do not give evidence to the contrary. . . n) This judgment of charity could nevertheless be mistaken according to the Word. They are not all Abraham's children because they are Abraham's seed, nor are they all Israel who are of the father of Israel [cf. Rom. 9:6-7]. . . With adults, too, the same thing appears repeatedly. There are those who upon profession of faith

In Genesis 17:7-8, God is promising to draw to himself a people from among our children. This isn't just: "I will save whoever chooses me from among your offspring." Rather, God is promising: "I will take it upon Myself to choose and save a people for Myself from among your offspring." The Lord is promising to call, and effectually draw, and save a people for himself from among our descendants. He will not only be our God; He has promised to be the God of our children also, and our children's children. And for how long does the covenant promise extend? Psalm 105:8-10 says, "to a thousand generations." The Lord is promising to preserve our covenant line—not only to our grand-children or great grand-children, but even to *a thousand generations*. Now if we tried to literally calculate this, and estimated a generation at a low twenty years, this would come out to 20,000 years! But of course this isn't a literal number of years being expressed here—it's a figure of speech implying an eternal covenant. We know this from Scriptures such as Isaiah 59:21, where we're told that God's covenant is confirmed not just to a thousand generations, but to 'your offspring's offspring. . . *from now and forever.*' The covenant is an *eternal* covenant. And it's not just eternal in the sense that it's never ending. The eternalness of the covenant isn't just speaking to the duration of the covenant, but to the *succession* of the covenant. It's not saying merely that God's covenant will continue in the world to thousands of generations—but that it will continue *to thousands of generations of those with whom He enters into covenant*. God's covenant won't just extend to a thousand generations in general—but to the untold generations still to come of those with whom He has entered into covenant—with their children, and children's children, forever: "*Never will the line of the faithful be cut off completely.*"<sup>131</sup>

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are received into the congregation, whom one thus has to regard as fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God. . . who nevertheless later fall away. . ." (pp173-75). Vos calls this view the *main* historical Calvinistic Reformed view. Having said that, Vos goes on to say: "there is a large objection to the first view if it teaches that all children are to be held to be regenerated and to possess the principle of faith until the opposite is apparent. . . one then cannot, with reason, pray for their regeneration as a thing that they must still receive or still need. The children themselves, in growing up, will be under the illusion that they possess regeneration, and the truth that without regeneration no one can see the kingdom of God will lose its force. It will gradually be seen in the congregation as something self-evident that whoever lies and dies within its circle is saved, since he has come into the world virtually as a regenerate person, is renewed and sanctified from his mother's womb. *This is extremely dangerous.*" (caps mine, p181). Then concluding on p187: "What is needed is more urging of the truth day by day, in the official cultivation of the children of the covenant as they grow up, and less pressing for a profession at a particular moment. But not only the requirement; the promise of God must also be pointed to. . . One can stress the obligations toward the covenant too much and overlook the giving side of the covenant too much. The one needs the other. Only presenting the obligations is deadening; only pointing to the promises causes indifference." (p187). So: 1) On the whole, we regard our children as elect until/if/when they prove otherwise, just as we do with adult members; we view with a judgment of charity; 2) But this in no way means that every single baptized infant covenant child is actually definitely regenerated; 3) Our children need both the consolation of the promises as well as exhortations; not either/or but both/and. They need to hear God has made promises to Mommy and Daddy's children too; they are part of the Covenant. But they need to be exhorted too: Embrace the covenant from the heart. Prove yourself a covenant keeper by faith. Embrace the God of your parents.

<sup>131</sup> The last line is a quote from O Palmer Robertson; but the whole section starting with Psalm 105 is a paraphrase of his material from his audio lectures on Covenant Theology (*The Unity of the Divine Covenants*, 46:14ff). Lastly, we need to clarify that there is still great mystery here. There are Christians who will never marry; there are Christian couples who will never have children; there are Christian parents whose only child or children have walked away from the Lord. So, if God is promising believers that He will save a portion of their physical offspring to a thousand generations, then how do we explain these things? In short, I believe Scripture teaches that the Lord will fulfill this promise mystically where He doesn't physically. Let's think back upon the Old Testament Scriptures. Barrenness, for instance was a common occurrence for them at that time, as it is today. And for the Old Testament believer, this was an absolutely terrible plight. Why was it so bad? I believe the primary reason had to do more with the implications of God's covenant promises failing to be brought to fulfillment than a cultural stigma or economic concerns. Well, it was for this very reason, it seems, that the Lord instituted the provision of the husband's brother. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 tells us that if a husband died who yet had no sons, his brother (or closest relative) was to marry his widow, and that the first-born whom she would bear would take on the name of his dead brother, "so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel." The concern wasn't the physical name. The concern was rather the covenant line in light of the promises God had made to believers and their children. We see this played out in Ruth. Boaz marries Ruth in order to raise up the name of her deceased husband Mahlon, "so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off" from Israel. Now, the firstborn son who is raised up is not physically named after Ruth's deceased husband Mahlon (he's named Obed). So again, the concern here wasn't the literal name; the concern was rather that the line of the deceased continue to be preserved with offspring *through a divinely provided, extra-ordinary means*. So even for those who had not been able to bear children, God provides a way for His promise to continue; God provides children in another way. God made a way for the line of the covenant to continue. What about for singles? Well, we could think of Scriptures like Isaiah 56:3-5, "Let not the . . . eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord, 'To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.'" God will keep His promise, though it may at times be different than the norm, or how we might naturally think. He is able to raise up children of Abraham from these stones. He is able to keep this His promise—to be God not only to us but also to our children after us. Whether it be through normal or exceptional and mystical means, He will keep His promise; and for that we can praise Him.